



# Texas Field Notes



## Desert Kingsnake

*Lampropeltis getula splendida*

One of the prettiest snakes to be found in south and west Texas is the desert kingsnake. A secretive and nocturnal snake, it is not as commonly seen as some species.

I lived in Corpus Christi, on the lower Texas coast, for a year in the early 1960's. One warm weekend day I explored the grassy fields near Corpus Christi Bay. I flipped a board and found my first desert kingsnake. This was a beautiful snake, with its bold black and yellow pattern. I had found a kingsnake or two in north

Texas and was used to the speckled pattern down the back with vague crossbars and suggestions of dorsal blotches. This is the intermediate or "intergrade" between the speckled and desert kingsnakes. However, in Corpus Christi this snake had a speckled pattern that formed very clear crossbars and black blotches containing no speckling. It was a pure desert kingsnake.

### **Classification**

One species, the "common" kingsnake, stretches from coast to coast including the eastern "chain" kingsnake of

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# Desert Kingsnake (continued)

the eastern U.S. and the California king-snake of the west. All are *Lampropeltis getula*. The genus *Lampropeltis* means “shiny shield” and refers to the glossy dorsal scales. The species *getula* is a Latin reference to an area of north Africa (perhaps an error in the original naming). The subspecies *splendida* means bright and splendid, a reference to the pattern. Kingsnakes are members of the large family Colubridae.

## Description

Desert kingsnakes are moderate-size snakes averaging about three to four feet long as adults. They have smooth, glossy scales. Like other “common” kingsnakes (*Lampropeltis*

extending up over the back as crossbars, leaving a series of unspeckled black blotches down the back. There are some regional variations in pattern, with desert kingsnakes from the Trans-Pecos more likely to have a “sockhead” pattern, in which the top of the head and first inch or so of the neck are black with no speckling.

## Habitat and Range

According to Conant & Collins, the desert kingsnake begins to intergrade with its speckled cousins throughout much of Kansas and Oklahoma, with “real” desert kingsnakes beginning in central and west Texas down into Mexico and westward

through parts of New Mexico and into the southeastern corner of Arizona. In Texas, Werler & Dixon show the line between speckled and desert kingsnakes running down through the panhandle and bending eastward so that it goes through Parker county west of the DFW area, and then south to the coast at about Refugio county. Presumably the snakes east of the line are likely to have more speckled characteristics, and those west of the line have more characteristics of the desert king-snake.



Desert kingsnake originating from the Lubbock area

*getula*), they have relatively small heads only a little wider than the neck, and small eyes. The belly scales may have more black than those of the speckled kingsnake. The pattern down the back involves heavy speckling with light yellow down the sides,

The area in which these snakes live contains a variety of habitats, including semiarid and desert, prairie and woodland, and thorn scrub. Desert kingsnakes utilize the burrows of other



Young Desert kingsnake from the area between Alpine and the Big Bend National Park. The lack of pattern on the first inch or so of the neck is referred to as a “sock-head” pattern

animals, crevices, and trashpiles for shelter, and they are most often found near sources of water such as streams or irrigation.

### **Prey**

These snakes have a varied diet, making use of reptiles, small mammals, frogs, and even birds, baby turtles, and eggs. Kingsnakes are powerful constrictors and can subdue larger prey by using their powerful coils to stop both breathing and circulation. They do not hesitate to eat other snakes including

rattlesnakes and even coral snakes. These kingsnakes have immunity to venom from pit-vipers and perhaps coral snakes as well. Rattlesnakes respond to the approach of a kingsnake by hiding their heads and hitting at the kingsnake with a coil of their bodies, as if knowing that their usual defenses will not work.

### **Behavior**

While speckled kingsnakes are sometimes irritable and prone to bite when picked up from the wild, the desert kingsnake is less aggressive. Nevertheless, a wild-caught desert kingsnake, like other members of the species, may thrash about and void feces and musk on the person who picks it up. This habit apparently has survival value in the wild. According to Werler & Dixon, when this snake’s musk was added to the food of skunks, badgers, and other small mammals, the potential predator either avoided the food or, after reluctantly eating, they vigorously tried to rub the smell off their snouts.

### **Reproduction**

Desert kingsnakes are among the many species in which ritual male combat may occur. Mating occurs mostly in April or May, and females lay eggs in June or July. The clutch of about 5 to 12 eggs is laid in damp, rotting wood or other moist location. Hatching occurs in August or September (possibly even early October). The little nine-inch hatchlings are brightly patterned with scattered, fused areas of yellow rather than individual speckles.

### **Abundance**

Tennant writes that the desert kingsnake is “uncommon” in most areas. Perhaps it is not often seen partly because of its secretive habits and because in more arid areas it is confined to areas around creeks and other sources of moisture.

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## Desert Kingsnake (continued)

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