

Mexican Black Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis getula nigrita*)

Difficulty: Easy



Mexican black kingsnakes (also known as black desert kingsnakes) are nocturnal snakes native to southern Arizona and northwestern Mexico. Their native habitat tends to be a fairly arid environment with sandy to stony soil. They spend most of their time on the ground rather than in trees, but they are still capable climbers.

Mexican black kingsnakes have a typical kingsnake appearance: oval head, round pupils, slender body, and smooth, glossy scales. However, what sets them apart is their jet-black coloration, with little to no pattern. Adult length ranges between 40-52".

Mexican black kingsnakes have become some of the most popular pet kingsnakes in the US due to their distinctive appearance, and generally make good pets like most kingsnakes. Expect your pet to live 20+ years with good care.

What You Need for a Bioactive Mexican Black Kingsnake Enclosure:

- 48" L x 24" W x 24" H front-opening enclosure, or larger
- [Exo Terra Reptile Deep Dome Fixture Small](#), x2
- [Arcadia Halogen Heat Lamp, 50w](#), x2
- Plug-in lamp dimmer, x2

- [Arcadia T5 HO Forest 6% UVB bulb, 22"](#)
- [The Bio Dude Solar Grow T5 HO Single Bulb Light Strip, 24"](#)
- [The Bio Dude Glow & Grow LED, 22"](#) (x2)
- [4' x 2' x 2' Terra Sahara Bioactive Kit](#)
- [Leopard Gecko Clean-Up Crew Pack](#)
- [Bearded Dragon Starter Plant Pack](#)
- [Exo Terra Corner Water Dish Large](#)
- [Thick climbing branches](#)
- [Cork logs](#)
- 2+ [hides/caves](#)
- [Bio Dude Digital Thermometer / Hygrometer](#), x2
- [Zoo Med Stainless Steel 10" Curved Feeding Tongs](#)

Terrarium Size

When it comes to choosing a terrarium for pet reptiles, keep in mind that larger is always better! Mexican black kingsnakes are active snakes that appreciate having plenty of room to stretch out, climb, and explore, and they quickly get bored in small or sparse enclosures. **The minimum enclosure size recommended for housing one Mexican black kingsnake is 48" L x 24" W x 24" H**, but larger is recommended if you have the space for it!

That said, baby Mexican black kingsnakes are quite small and adept at escaping from their enclosures. If you purchase your Mexican black kingsnake as a baby, it's a good idea to start them off in a temporary, escape-resistant front-opening glass 36" x 18" x 18" (40 gallons) enclosure to make it easier to keep track of them and reduce the risk of escape. Your pet will be able to comfortably live in this space until they reach approximately 36" long.

Because kingsnakes are generally known to be snake-eaters, multiple kingsnakes should not be housed in the same enclosure.

Lighting

Although Mexican black kingsnakes are capable of surviving without UVB lighting, it's best practice to include it as part of the snake's setup so it can still reap the benefits. Our goal as good reptile keepers is not to simply allow our pets to survive — it is to do everything in our power to enable them to thrive. And there is mounting scientific evidence that UVB is, in fact, beneficial to kingsnakes and other species.

Therefore **we recommend installing an Arcadia T5 HO Forest 6% or Zoo Med T5 HO Reptisun 5.0 in a reflective fluorescent fixture**, long enough to cover about 1/2 of the enclosure's length and placed next to the heat lamps. So for a 48" long enclosure, you will want a bulb about 22" long. Do not use other brands — when it comes to UVB, *brand matters!*

If your enclosure has a mesh top, it's best to install the UVB fixture on top of the enclosure. If it does not, it's best to also install a mesh lamp guard such as the Arcadia LampGuardPro over it so the snake can't come into direct contact with the bulb.

Because you're setting up a bioactive vivarium, **you will also need high-powered ~6500K LED plant lighting** to "feed" your plants and keep them healthy and growing well. As an additional benefit, the lamp will help better simulate the brightness of sunlight during the day, which may help stimulate better activity, appetite, and generally healthier hormonal rhythms. The Bio Dude Glow & Grow LED is a good lamp for this purpose. You should have enough LED lighting to span most of the enclosure's length.

Heating

Because kingsnakes are reptiles, they need a range of temperatures within their enclosure so they can regulate their own body temperature as needed. Areas of heat speed up their metabolism and promote activities like digestion and healing. Cool areas slow the metabolism and promote activities like rest and energy conservation.

According to climate data from Mexican black kingsnakes' natural habitat, they seem able to withstand higher temperatures than average. However, that should not be used as an excuse to cook your pet! **A Mexican black kingsnake's basking area should be between 85-90°F, and the cool side should be between 70-80°F.** Create the basking area by placing a platform or sturdy branch below the lamps.

Many kingsnake keepers will recommend using heat pads as the snake's primary source of heat, but heat pads don't work well in a bioactive enclosure. Instead, use a couple of heat bulbs like the 50w Arcadia Halogen Heat Lamp in small dome heat lamps. Plug each heat lamp into a lamp dimmer or dimming thermostat so you can control them if they get too hot.

To monitor the temperatures in your snake's enclosure, place one digital probe thermometer in the basking area, and another on the floor of the cool end.

Humidity

Mexican black kingsnakes are a semi-arid species, so tracking humidity for them isn't as important as it is for other kingsnakes as long as. However, although they can survive dry conditions, they still need access to humid microclimates in order to stay hydrated, keep their lungs healthy, and shed their skin properly. To be specific, **they should have access to a humid hideout at all times.** This hide should be placed on the cool half of the enclosure and lined with moistened sphagnum moss or substrate.

Don't forget to water your plants as needed.

Substrate

To create a Mexican black kingsnake vivarium, you will need a bioactive-compatible substrate. That means things like aspen shavings or bark chips aren't going to work. You need a soil-like mix that mimics the conditions of your snake's natural habitat. You can make your own with 60% plain topsoil and 40% play sand, or you can let The Bio Dude do the work for you with the Terra Sahara Bioactive Kit.

Because you're setting up a bioactive habitat, you will need to mix and layer the substrate with sphagnum moss, leaf litter, and pieces of bark. For best results, combine with an appropriate amount of Bio Dude Bio Shot.

Finally, in order to make the substrate functional, make sure to add semi-arid CUC organisms like powder white/orange isopods, giant canyon isopods, and arid springtails. You can also add other species like mealworms, super worms, and death-feigning beetles.

Bioactive is a big commitment, so it's best to set up your pet's adult enclosure as a bioactive vivarium rather than going bioactive with the grow-out enclosure and getting tempted not to upgrade when the time comes. The good news is that this gives you plenty of time to make sure your bio is well-established before introducing your pet!

Decorating the Enclosure

Enclosure décor is more than just making your setup look nice. It's also an important part of providing *environmental enrichment* to your kingsnake, which enhances your pet's quality of life by providing opportunities to express natural behaviors, explore, and exercise.

Here are some ideas for ways that you can decorate and enrich your kingsnake's bioactive enclosure:

- ledges
- hollow logs
- thick, sturdy branches
- hides/caves
- plants
- misc. décor

Feeding Your Mexican Black Kingsnake

Kingsnakes are obligate carnivores, which means that they *must* eat whole animals in order to get the nutrition they need. There is no replacement. Here is a rough sketch of how much and how often you should be feeding your snake, based on age:

- Hatchlings should be fed once every 5-7 days.
- Juveniles should be fed once every 7-10 days.
- Adults should be fed once every 10-14 days

Always feed your snake inside its enclosure, not outside. Contrary to the myth, feeding inside does not make snakes more aggressive. However, use feeding tweezers to offer the prey, not your hand, in order to prevent accidental strikes.

Variety is essential to complete nutrition. Aside from the usual mice and rats, you can add variety to your snake's diet with hamsters, gerbils, anoles, house geckos, and Reptilinks. However, do not offer live prey if it can be avoided. Frozen feeders should be completely thawed to 75-100°F before offering.

Of course, your kingsnake will also need a water bowl! Use something large enough for the snake to coil up in if desired, and heavy enough not to be tipped over easily. Keep the bowl full of fresh, clean water at all times. Scrub weekly with veterinary disinfectant such as F10SC or Rescue for good hygiene, or whenever the water becomes soiled.

Handling Tips

After bringing your new pet home, do not handle it until it is eating regularly. This can take anywhere from two weeks to two months, so be patient and use this time to make sure your husbandry is on point. Once your snake is ready for handling, handle it at least 1-2x weekly to keep it accustomed to you, but no more than once daily. Handling is also a good way to encourage your snake to exercise and provide additional enrichment!

Wash Your Hands First

Before you pick up your snake, first wash your hands with soap or hand sanitizer. This removes potentially harmful bacteria, viruses, or parasites from your hands, as well as makes your hands smell distinctly inedible. Kingsnakes are very enthusiastic predators, so if your hand smells like food, it might get treated like food.

How to Pick Up a Snake

Next, use a paper towel roll to tap its head (gently). This sets expectations by letting the snake know that it's time for handling, not food. Pick it up with two hands, one behind the head and one supporting the rest of the body. NEVER pick up a snake by its tail — this can really hurt their spine!

Safety with Snakes

Always supervise children closely when they are handling a pet snake (or any kind of pet, frankly). This is as much for the snake's safety as it is for the child's. Keep the snake's head away from your face, and always wash your hands and arms with soap or hand sanitizer after handling.

DO NOT Handle If...

Don't handle your snake within 48 hours of a meal, as this can stress them out and lead to regurgitation, which is a traumatic experience that can actually lead to death. Also, do not handle if your pet's eyes have turned opaque or cloudy. This means that the snake is preparing to shed and can't see well, making them more jumpy than usual and more likely to bite out of self-defense.

Care information courtesy of [ReptiFiles](#).