

The Eastern Kingsnake: A Study in Black and White

By Frederick Boyce

As this column has hopefully shown, few things concerning snakes are in black and white. One notable exception, however, is the eastern kingsnake, *Lampropeltis getula getula*, a handsome and familiar serpent which is found along the east coast from southern New Jersey and Pennsylvania, all the way down to northern Florida and southeastern Alabama.

Often called the “chain kingsnake” by old timers because of the bright white (or yellowish) rings that form a conspicuous chain-like pattern against a glossy, jet-black background, this large but harmless constrictor must be among the easiest snakes for a lay person to identify. It’s a bold, shiny, white-and-black snake—the only one like it in our part of the world, so there should be no mistaking it for anything else. There is some variation in the white bands, however, which can be narrow and broken in some specimens, or very wide in others.

The wide-ranging genus *Lampropeltis*, which also includes the milksnakes and the much smaller scarlet kingsnake, is represented from coast to coast, and from southeastern Canada all the way down to Ecuador. The snakes of this genus basically come in three sizes—large, medium and small. The smallest is the scarlet kingsnake, the brightly colored denizen of our coastal pine forests that is famed as a mimic of the venomous coral snake. Adorned with alternating red, black, and white (or yellow) rings, the scarlet kingsnake rarely exceeds 20 inches in length. The mid-sized members are the many various milksnakes and the prairie king and mole kingsnakes, which rarely exceed 36–40 inches in length. The seven largest kingsnakes, averaging between four and five feet in length, are all subspecies of the eastern kingsnake.

In Tennessee and Kentucky, the eastern kingsnake is replaced by the black kingsnake, which ranges from southern Indiana to northern Alabama and, as the name suggests, is solid, shiny black. Along the Gulf coast from central Alabama to eastern Texas, and north to Iowa is the domain of the pretty speckled kingsnake, which gives way to the desert kingsnake farther west. The west coast is home to the docile California kingsnake, a longtime favorite of the pet trade, which superficially resembles the eastern kingsnake (though it comes in striped as well as banded versions), and the Florida kingsnake is confined to peninsular Florida. The seventh subspecies, the Outer Banks kingsnake, is endemic (confined) to coastal North Carolina and is only found between Cape Hatteras and Cape Lookout. In appearance it is similar to a regular eastern kingsnake with a lot of light speckling or stippling on the background between the white bands. Our eastern kingsnake is the largest of the seven subspecies, averaging three to four feet in length, though I have personally handled several in the five-foot range.

The record for this species, as listed in the *Peterson Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians, Eastern/Central North America*, is an amazing 82 inches. As far as I know, the current record for a *Lampropeltis getula* in NC is a large male that was found near the intersection of US 70 and Merrimon Road by Phillip Walker Laxton, an EMT and snake enthusiast, who brought the snake to the aquarium to be measured. It proved to be 67.25 inches, a very respectable size.

Eastern kingsnakes can occur nearly everywhere in NC except for the extreme northwestern corner of the state, but they are more often encountered in the Coastal Plain. While I consider these snakes to be fairly common in the Croatan Forest and in our coastal counties in general, they are very rarely seen on Bogue Banks, though a few records do exist. They are mentioned by the Fort Macon naturalists, Elliott Coues and H. C. Yarrow, in their *Notes on the Natural History of Fort Macon, NC and Vicinity* (1878) as being “common on both the islands and mainland.”

Eastern kingsnakes are generalists in both their habitat and food preferences, meaning that they will pretty much eat anything and pretty much live anywhere. They can be exceptionally secretive and are often found hiding under boards or

other debris. Kingsnakes are especially famed for eating other snakes, including venomous ones, but they cannot be said to be truly *ophiophagus*, a word which literally means “snake-eater.” That term is best applied to such dietary specialists as the king cobra, which eats virtually nothing else besides snakes.

Kingsnakes, as we have said, are “generalists,” meaning that they aren’t picky about what they eat. They will relentlessly attack and devour all kinds of rodents, moles, voles and other small mammals, lizards (the legless glass lizards being favorite menu items), frogs and other amphibians, birds and eggs—especially turtle eggs, which some impatient kingsnakes have been known to consume even as they are being laid. It is a fact, however, that they are more than happy to constrict and consume most any type of snake they may cross paths with, and they do have a degree of resistance to the venom of our native pit vipers, so copperheads, cottonmouths and rattlesnakes are all fair game. A kingsnake will even consume a snake that is longer than itself, going about with the hapless victim’s tail protruding from its mouth for several days. For this reason, kingsnakes are often considered to be “good” snakes by many people, though I take a rather dim view of affixing such judgmental and anthropocentric labels to animals. They are what they are.

I prefer to think of kingsnakes as being highly competitive animals that simply out-compete other snakes in every way—eating up all the food and occasionally eating up the other snakes as well, whenever they cross paths. After all, what better way to out-compete a rival than to simply swallow him whole?

Sources used in the writing of this article: *Peterson Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians, Eastern/Central North America*, by Roger Conant; Savannah River Ecology Laboratory, University of Georgia: srelherp.uga.edu/snakes

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An eastern kingsnake as found in the author’s yard last summer, having constricted an eastern mole.—Photos by Fred Boyce



Baby kingsnakes are perfect miniatures of the adults. All kingsnakes are egg layers.