

Mole Kingsnake

By Frederick Boyce

There is a new snake to see in the Snake Pavilion at the North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores—one that is rarely seen or exhibited because of its secretive nature and specialized burrowing habits. Although it is native to the Piedmont and the Coastal Plain of our state, the mole kingsnake is much less familiar to most people than its close relative, the conspicuously black and white eastern, or chain, kingsnake. Both belong to the genus *Lampropeltis*, which includes the king and milk snakes.

These snakes are all nonvenomous constrictors which subdue their prey by squeezing it to death in their powerful coils, and they will gladly eat other snakes, as well as rodents and other small mammals, lizards, occasional birds and sometimes turtle eggs. They have smooth, shiny scales, and small, streamlined heads that are more or less bullet-shaped and do not diverge from the body.

The mole kingsnake, with its delightfully unhandy scientific name of *Lampropeltis calligaster rhombomaculata* (which has the same number of syllables as “supercalifragilisticexpialidocious”) is a southeastern subspecies (race) of the very widespread Prairie kingsnake, which is found throughout much of the Midwest. As with many other snakes, there is some degree of regional variability, resulting in snakes from certain specific locations having brighter, more vibrant colors or perhaps more distinctive patterns, making them more desirable to herpers (the reptile-amphibian equivalent of birders). In our state, there are two distinct color phases of the mole kingsnake. The more normal, default coloration is a plain brown or tan ground color with a pale yellowish underside and a series of small, widely spaced reddish rectangles down the middle of the back, positioned at right angles to the spine. Compared to the square red blotches on a corn snake, for instance, the blotches on a mole king are much smaller and spaced much farther apart. In mature individuals these markings are often faded and very indistinct, and older snakes can be just plain brown with a pale belly.

My father once long ago brought me such a snake in a mayonnaise jar. He had turned it up while ploughing on our farm and didn't know what kind of snake it was (though he knew it was not a copperhead, the only venomous species we had in our area). More surprising, at least to me, was the fact that I didn't know what kind of snake it was either—a rather humbling experience for a nine-year-old herpetologist who thought he knew everything there was to know about snakes, or our local ones anyway. I had to look it up in my *Peterson Field Guide*, but even then it wasn't easy to identify, as the small red rectangles on my specimen had almost completely faded away, leaving me with a very plain brown snake and giving me the very erroneous first impression that mole kingsnakes were not all that attractive.

The photo accompanying this article of a stunning example I found recently in the NC Piedmont begs to differ. While not well known to lay people, mole kings rank very high on the list of snakes that absolutely delight herpers, for whom they are a favorite target species in the field. A mole king is always considered to be a prize find, and its photos are sure to find their way into any proud herper's Facebook feed. The typical brown-tan phase occurs in the Piedmont as well as in the Coastal Plain, but there is also a red phase—a rich red-wine color with dark, almost black, blotches or narrow bands—that occurs only near the coast. Several snakes in our area exhibit this tendency to be red, or *erythristic*, most notably the red-phase Carolina pygmy rattlesnakes that all the others, which are nonvenomous, are often presumed to be trying to mimic. The real reason for these red coastal Carolina snake specialties remains a mystery, but whatever the reason, the mole kingsnake now on display at the aquarium is a fine example of this coastal red phase—and a very attractive little reptile it is.

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Brown phase of the mole kingsnake photographed in the North Carolina Piedmont—Photos by Fred Boyce



Coastal red phase mole kingsnake at the NC Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores

PKS Fishing Tournament

Mark your calendars for the 3rd Annual Pine Knoll Shores Fishing Tournament on October 20. Invite your kids and grandkids to enjoy good fishing and laughs at the weigh-in.

There will be a separate competition for kids 12 and under as well as the regular tournament. Start practicing now and find the best places to fish.

Details and rules will come later.

