

Speckled King Snake

Class: Reptilia. **Order:** Squamata. **Family:** Colubridae.

Other names: salt and pepper snake

Physical Description: The coloration is black or dark brown with yellow (sometimes white) specks usually 1 per scale. There is variation in the arrangement of these dots; some specimens have the dots arranged in such a way as to form a chainlike pattern on the back with speckling on the side of the snake. Others may be predominately black with a light sprinkling of dots. Some specimens may have the dots distributed evenly about the snake (this is how this kingsnake gets the local name salt and pepper snake). The scales are smooth with the belly scales being black and white checked. Juveniles tend to be a dark olive green. They grow to 36-48 inches. Record was 72 inches. Hatchlings are 7-9 inches.



The speckled king snake is a member of the family of **harmless snakes**, or **Colubridae**. This is the largest order of snakes, representing two-thirds of all known snake species. Members of this family are found on all continents except Antarctica, widespread from the Arctic Circle to the southern tips of South America and Africa. All but a handful of species are harmless snakes, not having venom or the ability to deliver toxic saliva through fangs. Most harmless snakes subdue their prey through constriction, striking and seizing small rodents, birds or amphibians and quickly wrapping their body around the prey causing suffocation. While other small species such as the common garter snake lack powers to constrict and feed on only small prey it can overpower.

Harmless snakes range in size from 5 inches to nearly 12 feet in length. The largest American species of snake is the indigo snake, a member of this family. It can grow to 11 feet as an adult!

Diet in the Wild: Snakes (including venomous ones), other small reptiles, amphibians, birds, eggs, small mammals, occasionally fish.

Diet at the Zoo: Rodents

Habitat & Range: Habitat includes grasslands, prairies, woodlands and rocky terrain. Prefers wetter habitat than other kingsnakes and is known to live in fresh or brackish swamplands. Found from southern Iowa to the Gulf Coast; west to Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas; east to Alabama, Tennessee and Illinois. (Central to southern United States). Its territory overlaps with the desert king snakes.

Life Span: Up to 20 years.

Perils in the wild: Man, birds of prey, some carnivores, other king snakes

Physical Adaptations:

- Kingsnakes have a **Jacobson's organ**, pair of pit-like organs on the roof of the mouth that are lined with olfactory cells and nerves that interpret chemical stimuli in an animal's surroundings.

- Their forked tongue, flickering through the air, picks up scent particles and conveys them to the roof of their mouth and the Jacobson's organ.

Behavioral Adaptations:

- They are diurnal in the spring and fall becoming largely nocturnal in summer.
- Speckled kingsnakes are active snakes, wandering a great deal, but are still somewhat secretive.
- Like most snakes, kingsnakes are mainly solitary.
- When upset they will "rattle" their tails, use musk and defecation to disgust potential predators.
- Young specimens are particularly testy and will strike and musk freely when picked up.

Reproduction and Development:

- Kingsnakes are *oviparous* or egg-laying animals.
- They breed in early spring, lays 6-14 eggs under logs, stumps, rocks or decaying plant material. Eggs hatch in late summer months.

Additional Information:

- They are commonly bred in captivity. They are aggressive feeders. They seem to have immunity to venom, even when bitten. They are not known to be good climbers.
- They are considered threatened in Iowa.
- Kingsnakes are immune to the venom of North American venomous snakes and venomous snakes will use other methods to escape kingsnakes. Instead of striking, the venomous species will throw loops of coils at the kingsnake in an attempt to bat the kingsnake's head and then escape quickly. Kingsnakes are even known to consume other kingsnakes.

Ecological Role of Reptiles:

- Snakes play an important role as both prey and predator in ecosystems all over the world. They can be very important in regulating the populations of pest species such as rodents which are common around human activity.
- Don't buy pets if you don't know where they are from – ongoing trade in reptile products has a huge effect on the numbers of valuable species in the wild. Even buying tropical species from legal sources increases demand and encourages illegal trading.

Conservation Status: (IUCN Status)

- Not Assessed, IUCN 2013

Conservation Efforts:

- No conservation efforts at this time.

Sources:

- Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Gardens
- <http://www.generalexotics.com/snakes/king-snakes-for-sale/speckled-king-snake>
- <http://www.herpnet.net/iowa>
- Hickman, C.P. Roberts, L.S. 1994. Biology of Animals
- Halliday, T. Adler, K. 1986. The Encyclopedia of Reptiles and Amphibians.