Calm and not too big, the gray-banded kingsnake is a much-loved pet.

BY GEROLD AND CINDY MERKER

When I start an article, I usually include a story about keeping and/or looking for the subject of the article. A sentence containing the phrase, “The night was inky dark...” is usually found in the first or second paragraph of the tale, but in regard to my story for this article, I would be lying if I included that phrase because the moon was essentially full and the desolate West Texas landscape was considerably bright. Moon phase is often thought to influence surface movement by snakes, and a full moon is thought to be a deal breaker for that movement to occur.

We had been walking the lonely, well-lit roadside cuts of a well-known gray-banded kingsnake locale for about an hour when I spied a young one calmly crawling on a road cut about 25 feet straight up. This was the first live gray-banded kingsnake I had seen in 27 nights of walking the lonesome roadsides of West Texas, and I could not bear the thought of not at least catching and photographing the snake on the makeshift set I had back at my motel.

In my younger years, I would have immediately climbed up the cut with nary a thought, but at 61 years of age, my slightly paunchy (OK, very paunchy) 6-foot 4-inch frame appeared not to have much climbing left in it! I quietly called my friend Bob over, but I couldn’t ask him to perform the necessary feat because he was a few years older than me. Instead, I asked Bob to walk back to the car, approximately a quarter of a mile away, to retrieve my snake hook. I figured with that snake hook and my height, I would only have to climb approximately 15 feet to get to the snake. A potential fall, then, would be painful, but hopefully not life threatening!

The snake stayed put for the next 10 minutes, seemingly delighting in staring at me and knowing it was safe up on the
cut. Bob returned with the snake hook and I studied the cut to determine the safest route up. My first attempt was an epic fail, with me sliding five feet to the bottom. My second attempt, though painfully slow and, I’m sure, very awkward in appearance, soon brought me within reach of the snake, which had remained stationary during my approach. I reached up and grabbed it, then immediately thought, now what? Boo suggested I gently drop the snake down to him to free up my right hand in order to safely climb down the cut. I did exactly that, and Bob caught the snake. My heart pounding with anticipation, I climbed down as quickly as I could to examine the animal.

**Two Types**

The gray-banded kingsnake (*Lampropeltis alterna*) is a medium-sized colubrid snake found in West Texas, extreme southern New Mexico and northern Mexico. At one time there were two species, *Lampropeltis alterna* and *L. blairi*, until both were later grouped under *L. alterna*. So now there is the one species, but with two morphs: the alterna morph, which is typically found in the western part of the snake’s range, and the blairi morph, found in the eastern regions.

The alterna morph has a pattern of reduced orange bands with narrower alternate bands between the primary bands. The blairi type exhibits a pattern of broad saddles (usually 12 to 15) containing varying degrees of red or orange, and there are very few, if any, alternate bands between the saddles. The gray ground color of both morphs is highly variable, from light gray to almost black. Of course, there are exceptions to all these general descriptions regarding color and pattern.

Most adult gray-banded kingsnakes are in the 24- to 30-inch range, although one behemoth was captured in the eastern part of the gray-band’s range that measured almost 60 inches! Typical of the genus *Lampropeltis*, the gray-banded kingsnake is an egg-laying species.

Gray-banded kingsnakes are saxico-
lous, or rock-dwelling, snakes. They are, for the most part, nocturnal animals, venturing to the surface from their limestone environment when temperatures in the Chihuahuan Desert cool down into the 70s or 80s Fahrenheit. Surface activity commences during the spring, and animals remain active until October. Brumation takes place during the winter months, and there are very few records of gray-banded kingsnakes being found in the dead of winter.

**Cage Requirements**

Gray-banded kingsnakes are easily kept in a wide variety of enclosures. Caging as simple as a 10-gallon terrarium to elaborate display cages all work very well for this species. Escape-proof caging is very important; we have fallen victim to escaped snakes several times, occasionally with disastrous results. There are many escape-proof reptile cages available that will work well with gray-banded kingsnakes that are escape-proof, including some with locking mechanisms, and we recommend that you spend the extra money to acquire one of these enclosures.

Because we keep a number of these animals, we are currently using a rack system in order to save space. Again, purchasing such a system requires that you do your homework and ensure that the rack is escape-proof. A lot of rack systems on the market are designed for ball pythons and have rather large gaps between the cage top and the plastic tray, which might allow a gray-banded kingsnake the opportunity to escape.

Substrate selection is also an important consideration when maintaining gray-banded kingsnakes in captivity. Pine shavings with a heavy scent are not recommended; beware of substrates that have additives to reduce rodent odor as they may have deleterious effects on the captive snakes maintained upon them because they contain drying agents.

For our gray-banded kingsnakes, we prefer to use simple paper substrate, hard wood chips or aspen shavings. Paper substrates have the disadvantage of requiring frequent cleaning after an animal defecates on them, but the advantage is that it is easy to observe the animal and its enclosure for any problems. Other types of shavings, such as aspen, last longer and allow for spot cleaning, keeping the animals in a sanitary setting.

A hide area placed in the cage is a good idea for this species. Gray-bands are often shy feeders and a hide will allow a sense of security. We have had snakes that refused to accept mice until a hide area was provided. Simple opaque plastic boxes are readily available and can be used, and there are many commercially available caves and other hiding décor available in pet stores that sell reptile supplies.

Water is necessary for the successful maintenance of gray-banded kingsnakes, and we provide a water bowl with clean water for ours at all times. Often, the snakes will defecate inside their water bowls, which should then be removed and cleaned or replaced immediately. Our gray-band trays (remember, we house our snakes in a rack system) include plastic holders that house a
The altena morph is more likely to be found in the western part of the gray-banded kingsnake’s range.

16-ounce plastic deli cup, which facilitates easy removal of a soiled water container and replacement with a clean one.

Temperature Regime
An essential consideration to the proper long-term survival of the gray-banded kingsnake is the temperature at which the animal is maintained. If the enclosure temperature is too cold, the snake will not be able to properly digest its food, or it may get a respiratory illness or not shed properly or have difficulties with any number of other life functions. If the cage is too hot, the snake will quickly succumb.

The best strategy to successfully implement the proper temperature is to allow the snake access to a range of temperatures. This is easily accomplished by using an under-cage heater or heat tape on one side of the cage, set to maintain this warm end at 80 to 85 degrees Fahrenheit. We achieve these temperatures by connecting heat tape to a thermostat.

Placing the heating device under one end of the enclosure automatically creates a temperature range from an ambient temperature — usually 70 to 78 degrees during spring, summer and fall — at the opposite end of the cage to the 80 to 85 degrees at the warm end. This temperature range then allows the snake to choose the temperature that best suits its particular needs at the time.

Young gray-banded kingsnakes may need to be enticed to accept pink mice by using a lizard to scent them.

Feeding Strategies
One of the most challenging aspects we encounter in maintaining gray-banded kingsnakes is feeding the neonates. We have produced hundreds of babies over the past 39 seasons and have found that fewer than 15 percent of the neonates will eat the preferred captive food item: a pink mouse.

Most neonate gray-bands require some form of enticement to get them to eat a pink mouse. Often, this requires the use of a lizard as a scenting item. This strategy requires placing a pink mouse in a container with a fresh, usually living, lizard. We have used various species of
lizards for scenting, but have had great success with spiny lizards of the genus *Sceloporus*. Other lizards that work well for scenting include earless sand lizards (*Cophosaurus*), whiptail lizards (*Aspidelix*) and side-blotched lizards (*Uta*).

In our rural area, we often find road-killed lizards and will harvest any fresh specimens and freeze them. Then we will later take pieces of skin off of the frozen lizard and place it on the head of a live pinkie that has been washed with a very mild soap solution, then rinsed. Often, difficult gray-band feeders will eat these “doctored” pink mice with relish.

Another very successful feeding strategy was discovered a few years back, when herpetoculturists discovered that the use of a boiled pink mouse works very well in getting stubborn snake neonates to take their first meal. The strategy is to take a frozen pink mouse and place it in a boiling or near-boiling pot of water for 10 to 15 seconds. It is then removed, dried and offered to the baby snake. Amazingly, we have found this strategy works with more than 50 percent of our neonatal gray-banded kingsnakes. Care must be taken to ensure the pink mouse is not frozen in the center, as the feeding of partially frozen food items can cause gastric distress and the possible death of a neonatal snake.

Once the hurdle of getting a neonate to take a pink mouse is overcome, a gray-banded kingsnake can grow swiftly and reach adulthood in several years. All of our captive-raised adults feed readily on appropriately sized frozen/thawed mice. Feeding live mice can result in injury to your snake, so a dead mouse is always preferred.

**Brumation Needed**

Of utmost importance to the health of gray-banded kingsnakes is supplying them with a period of winter cooling known as brumation. Not a true hibernation, this cooling is utilized by most temperate ectotherms during periods of colder temperatures and limited food resources. It is used by breeders of gray-banded kingsnakes to “set the physiological clock” of their snakes.

A brumation period is easily accomplished. In late fall, stop feeding your snake. Maintain it at the normal temperatures by leaving the cage heater on. This period will allow the snake to pass any
As it is a rock-dwelling snake, a naturalistic enclosure for a gray-banded kingsnake could include some rocks; just be sure they are arranged safely and not able to topple over.

This is the set-up that the authors use for their gray-bands, with a plastic deli cup as an easily replaceable water dish and a decorative hide. Note also, the humid hide with moistened paper towel inside to help the snake shed.

Offering a frozen/thawed mouse in a dish makes it easier for keepers to determine if their snake has fed, and it also cuts down the possibility of substrate being accidentally ingested.

food items it has recently ingested. Do not feed it during this time!

After two weeks, turn off the cage heater and allow the terrarium to cool to the “winter” temperatures, usually within 50 to 60 degrees, though slight deviations from this range are not a problem. We have had temperatures in our animal room drop to around 45 degrees for brief periods with no problems.

Keep the snake at the cooler temperatures, with water and no food, for two to three months. It will still move about the enclosure, albeit at a much slower pace.

After the two- to three-month brumation period, simply turn on the cage heater. Your gray-band should start eating regularly within two weeks. In fact, problem feeders sometimes come out of brumation with voracious appetites.

**Problems and Solutions**

Occasionally, gray-banded kingsnakes will have difficulty shedding their skin. Placing a damp hide inside the cage can solve this problem. Simply use a plastic container with a lid, and drill a hole in the lid that is twice the diameter of the snake. Inside of the container, place dampened paper towels or sphagnum moss. Usually, the gray-band will take refuge inside the container, and the damp environment will moisten the shed so the snake can pull it off without too much difficulty. Occasionally, however, you might have to gently assist your snake in the shedding process.

Wild-caught gray-banded kingsnakes occasionally harbor internal parasites. If you purchase a captive-bred individual, internal parasites are usually not a problem. If you suspect parasites, a trip to your local exotic veterinarian is in order. S/he will prescribe medication, which is usually safe if properly used. Trying to use medications for parasites purchased from a local feed store may cause problems with proper dosing and is not recommended.

With proper care gray-banded kingsnakes can live well over 30 years. Caging, nutrition, temperature regime, and addressing health issues proactively are all important considerations ensuring a long life for this beautiful species while under your care. **Reptiles**

**Gerold and Cindy Merker** have written over 100 articles on various herp and invertebrate species. They have been working with gray-banded kingsnakes for the past 40 years, and Gerold has co-authored a book on the species—*Albomark: The Gray-Banded Kingsnake*—with his son, Walter.