

## EASTERN KINGSLAKE

*Lampropeltis getula*

**Order:** Squamata  
**Family:** Colubridae  
**FNAI Ranks:** G5/S1S2  
**U.S. Status:** none  
**FL Status:** none



**Description:** This redefined and more limited species is what remains from the formerly more broadly defined and inclusive concept of the eastern kingsnake, *Lampropeltis getula*, which was split into three species (including *L. floridana* and *L. meansi*) by Krysko et al. (2017). Some believe, however, that their prior recognition as subspecies continues to be more appropriate given the large hypothesized hybrid (“intergrade”) zones. All are medium sized non-venomous snakes with a relatively small head and eyes, smooth (unkeeled) dorsal scales, and undivided anal scale; adults are typically 90–120 cm (3–4 ft), with males somewhat larger than females. The dorsal pattern of *L. getula* at all ages is black to dark brown, with 19–32 (sometimes more) narrow, light-colored crossbands that extend laterally to form a chain-like pattern. The belly is checkered with dark and light squares (Krysko and Judd 2006, Krysko et al. 2019).

**Similar Species:** The population of kingsnakes in the lower Apalachicola region of the central Panhandle is now recognized as a distinct species, *L. meansi*. It is characterized by no more than 25 wide crossbands (>2.5 scale rows wide, vs. 1.5–2.5 scale rows in *L. getula*). Although young are often similar to *L. getula* (black with light crossbands), adult *L. meansi* may become striped or bear a patternless light yellow to speckled dorsal pattern. Kingsnakes in the area immediately surrounding the tiny range of *L. meansi* may resemble either species or show a combination of characters. The Florida kingsnake, *L. floridana*, of the peninsula typically has 34–78 narrow, light-colored crossbands, although these become indistinct as the general pattern lightens with age to become yellowish or speckled. Rat snakes (*Pantherophis* species) within the range of *L. getula* reach sizes comparable to kingsnakes but have lightly keeled mid-dorsal scales, a divided anal scale, a somewhat larger head with more pronounced eyes, and a pattern dominated by gray, yellow, or reddish orange. Young indigo snakes (*Drymarchon*) are almost entirely black and usually heavier in build. Coachwhips (*Masticophis flagellum*) and black racers (*Coluber constrictor*) are long, slender, and mostly patternless (tan and black, respectively). Mudsnakes (*Farancia abacura*) can be as large as kingsnakes and with black backs and smooth scales, but they normally have red bars (rarely white) on their venters and lower sides. The

related rainbow snake (*F. erythrogramma*) has red stripes on its black back and sides.

**Habitat:** Although kingsnakes in the *L. getula* complex generally are upland species, they frequently occur near wetlands. This species may utilize hardwood hammocks, upland pine, pine flatwoods, cypress strands, wet prairies, seepage bogs, floodplain swamps, stream and lake margins, canal banks, and even salt marshes (Krysko et al. 2019), as well as some ruderal situations.

**Seasonal Occurrence:** This species is mainly active from April through October and relatively dormant in colder months. Though principally diurnal, foraging and movement can occur nocturnally.

**Florida Distribution:** *L. getula* occurs patchily throughout the Panhandle and northern peninsula. A hypothesized zone of hybridization with the peninsular *L. floridana* spans a swath of counties situated roughly along a line from Levy on the Gulf Coast to St. Johns on the Atlantic Coast. A similar hypothesized hybrid zone surrounds the small range of *L. meansi* in the Apalachicola lowlands in Franklin and Liberty counties. Snakes in these zones may resemble either species or be morphologically intermediate between the two (Krysko et al. 2017, 2019).

**Range-wide Distribution:** The range of this species encompasses all Atlantic coastal states from Florida to New Jersey.

**Conservation Status:** All kingsnakes in the *L. getula* complex have declined in Florida since at least the mid-twentieth century, with resulting patchy populations replacing historically more widespread ones. Habitat loss (including wetland filling) and fragmentation are surely major factors, but others include road mortality, fire ant predation on eggs and hatchlings, pollution, overcollection for the commercial pet trade (Enge 2005), use of biocides (pesticides, herbicides, and rodenticides), and potentially disease. Use of poisoned eggs may have caused serious declines in the quail-hunting plantation region in the central Florida Panhandle. Collection threat may have been ameliorated by successful captive breeding, but some collecting likely still occurs.

**Protection and Management:** Document all observations of this snake; photodocumentation is important given the presumed zones of hybridization (Krysko et al. 2017, 2019). Determine whether fire ants are a significant threat (and if so, control), and whether snake fungal disease affects this species. Road

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mortality is a known threat to kingsnakes in the *L. getula* complex (Godley et al. 2017); construction of new roads and expansion of existing ones within areas supporting kingsnake populations should be avoided. Wildlife crossing corridors beneath existing roads may also facilitate safe movements. Legal protection limiting the collection of wild specimens of *L. getula* is appropriate. Due to the rarity and declining population status of nearly all members of the *Lampropeltis getula* complex in Florida, consideration should be given to listing *L. getula* at least at the state level (Krysko and Smith 2005, Krysko et al. 2017).

**References:** Enge 2005, Godley et al. 2017, Krysko et al. 2019, Krysko and Judd 2006, Krysko et al. 2017, Krysko and Smith 2005.



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