



Western New York Herpetological Society

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Common Name: Milk Snake

Latin name: *Lampropeltis triangulum*

Native to: Southeastern Canada to northern South America

Size: From 6" to 28" for *L. t. elapsoides*, the Scarlet Kingsnake to 16" to 48" for *L. t. gaigeae* the Black Milk Snake and *L. t. hondurensis*, the Honduran Milk Snake.

Life span: 20 + years, average is 15 years.

General appearance: This species is represented by three general pattern types: tri-colored in which the snake possesses bold rings of white/ yellow, black, and red/orange, which may or may not extend onto the belly and completely encircle the snake. The other commonly encountered pattern type for this species is that of a light tan, gray or cream background color with darker red, russet or brown dorsal and lateral blotches. The last pattern type belongs only to the black milk snake *L. t. gaigeae*. This snake starts out tri-colored but turns into a completely patternless black snake by two years of age.

Depending on the sub-species, milk snakes can be either heavy bodied (Pueblan, Black and Mexican) or slim (Sinaloan, Nelson's and Scarlet Kingsnake).

Housing requirements:

Enclosure: Milk snakes are secretive animals that prefer to conceal themselves. Because of their desire to squeeze into the tiniest of cracks and crevices, they are also born escape artists. Their enclosure should reflect these characteristics. The length of a milk snake's cage should be at least 2/3's of the snake's body length and should possess multiple hiding areas. Baby milk snakes will do well in either plastic shoebox containers or small glass aquaria, 2 1/2 to 5 gallons. Adults can be successfully maintained in 16" by 24" plastic sweater boxes or larger glass aquaria, 20 to 30 gallon long tanks. In all cases, the opening to the enclosure must be secure or the snake will escape.

Temperature: Being a temperate to a sub-tropical species, milk snakes will do well with daytime ambient air temperatures ranging from 78 to 82 degrees F. The air temperature may be allowed to drop to 65 to 70 degrees F. at night.

Unless they are being brumated (hibernated) milk snakes should always have access to warmer localized temperatures to aid in digestion, immune function and metabolism. These higher temperatures are most easily achieved by placing a heat pad underneath 1/4 to 1/3 of the enclosure and either set to the low setting or adjusted with a rheostat (dimmer switch) and monitored to make sure it stays within the appropriate range of 84 - 88 degrees F. This thermal gradient will allow the snake to choose the temperature that suits its immediate needs.



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Heat/Light: Added light is not necessary if temperatures can be maintained within the desired ranges with a heat pad. Milk snakes are crepuscular, meaning they come out during the subdued lighting of dawn and dusk. They do not like bright light.

If lighting proves to be necessary in order to maintain adequate temperatures, keepers should either use blue, red or black colored lights to reduce the brightness within the tank. If no other option is available, low wattage incandescent "white" lights can be used as long as the snake has adequate hiding areas and the lights are turned off in the evening. As with the other heat sources, temperatures should be monitored with an accurate thermometer.

Substrate: Being secretive, milk snakes will thrive in particulate substrates that they can bury themselves in. Acceptable choices are pine and aspen shavings as well as cypress mulch for larger specimens. Other acceptable substrates include newspaper, butcher paper, paper towel and indoor - outdoor carpeting (astro-turf). Never use cedar shavings as they exude compounds that can be irritable to the snake's mucus membranes.

Environment: The enclosure of a milk snake should always be dry. It should contain multiple hiding areas and a sturdy bowl for drinking. Water should be changed at least once a week.

Diet: In nature, milk snakes feed on a number of small vertebrates, including frogs, small rodents, other snakes and lizards. In captivity, most milk snakes will eagerly feed on domestically bred, pre-killed mice. Snakes should be well started on rodents prior to sale in a retail outlet. Never feed your milk snake foods procured from the wild, as they will transmit harmful internal parasites. As the snake grows it should be given proportionately larger food items. Babies will start on pre-killed pink mice, while adults of most sub-species can handle pre-killed sub-adult mice. A good rule of thumb when feeding any captive snake is that the food item should not be larger than 1 and 1/2 times the girth of the snake at its widest point.

Maintenance: If kept in a dry cage with a sturdy water bowl, milk snakes can be very easy to maintain. The cage should be spot cleaned for feces daily if particulate substrates are used (mulch, shavings etc.) If paper substrates are used they should also be changed as they are soiled. The entire cage should be cleaned with an antibacterial dish detergent at least monthly. As stated earlier, the water bowl should be disinfected with antibacterial soap and changed at least weekly.

Other references or recommended reading:

The General Care and Maintenance of Milk Snakes, Robert W. Applegate, Advanced Vivarium Systems, 1992.