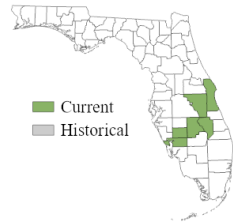


## SOUTH FLORIDA MOLE KINGSNAKE

*Lampropeltis occipitolineata*

**Order:** Squamata  
**Family:** Colubridae  
**FNAI Ranks:** G2/S2  
**U.S. Status:** none  
**FL Status:** none



**Description:** This is one of three species of snakes, including two in Florida, formerly considered as subspecies of the encompassing prairie kingsnake (*Lampropeltis calligaster*). All are medium sized non-venomous snakes with a relatively small head and eyes, smooth (unkeeled) scales, and undivided cloacal (anal) scale; adults are typically 75–100 cm (ca. 30–40 in). The dorsal pattern of all three consists of a large number of dark-edged brown to reddish brown blotches that extend onto the tail; these typically number 75 or more in *L. occipitolineata* (fewer than 72 in the other two species). The belly is white to cream, usually with squarish brown blotches. Juveniles are similar to adults though may be more boldly marked (Powell et al. 2016, McKelvy and Burbrink 2017, Krysko et al. 2019).

**Similar Species:** Within its range, the terrestrial snake that is most likely to be confused with this species is the red ratsnake or cornsnake (*Pantherophis guttatus*); however, it has far fewer dorsal blotches (30–40), a somewhat larger head with more pronounced eyes, a more distinct neck, usually a black and white checkerboard pattern on the belly, and, like all ratsnakes, weakly keeled (bearing a fine longitudinal ridge) scales on the back and a divided cloacal scale. Small juvenile black racers (*Coluber constrictor*) and coachwhips (*Masticophis* [or *Coluber*] *flagellum*) have numerous dark blotches down the back but are quite slender and have large heads and eyes as well as a divided cloacal. Florida (banded) water snakes (*Nerodia fasciata pictiventris*) have reddish to brown crossbands rather than isolated blotches, keeled dorsal scales, a divided cloacal, and generally a darker ground color.

**Habitat:** This is a snake primarily of dry prairie and open south Florida flatwoods, with the exception of one record from an area of maritime hammock in the Cape Canaveral region. Snakes have also been observed in or near various ruderal

situations (e.g., near citrus groves, pastures, fields, roads, and trash dumps; Krysko et al. 2019). The species is largely fossorial but does move and hunt for prey on the surface as well

**Seasonal Occurrence:** The species occurs year-round in appropriate habitats. Activity may be reduced in colder months, although gravid females have been captured in late February (Krysko et al. 2019).

**Florida Distribution:** *L. occipitolineata* is endemic to the south-central and southwestern Florida peninsula, with a potentially isolated population in the Cape Canaveral area on the Atlantic coast. Confirmed records exist for Brevard, Osceola, Highlands, Okeechobee, DeSoto, and Charlotte counties, with unconfirmed reports from Indian River, Glades, and Hendry counties (O'Horo and Enge 2008, Krysko et al. 2019).

**Range-wide Distribution:** This species is restricted to Florida.

**Conservation Status:** Because of its secretive habits, the species' true conservation status is problematic. It almost certainly has declined in conjunction with destruction, degradation, and development of habitat throughout its limited range; much of its dry prairie habitat was cleared for pastures and sod farms in the preceding century, and these may be superseded by urbanization and climate change in southern Florida in this century. All kingsnakes are subject to collecting pressure for the pet trade, though this potential threat may have been ameliorated by successful captive breeding. Mortality of snakes from automobile strikes is an ongoing threat to this and many snakes, though its significance is difficult to measure. There are very few records of this species' occurrence on conservation lands, although the difficulty of collecting and observing it in such situations may belie its presence and certainly its abundance.

**Protection and Management:** Document all observations of this snake; photodocumentation is important given that some past records were based on misidentified cornsnakes. Determine whether fire ants are a significant threat, and whether snake fungal disease affects this species. Survey for this species on all conservation lands within 10 miles (17 km) of documented records; these include Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area, Kissimmee River, Taylor Creek/Nubbins Slough STA, Bright Hour Watershed,

## South Florida Mole Kingsnake

## *Lampropeltis occipitolineata*

Babcock Ranch, and Babcock-Webb Wildlife Management Area. All opportunities to protect additional private lands adjacent to or within a few km of these sites merit pursuit. Prohibit the sale of wild-caught animals.

**References:** Krysko et al. 2019, McKelvy and Burbrink 2017, O'Horo and Enge 2008, Powell et al. 2016, Price 1987, Tennant 1997.



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