

NORTHERN MOLE KINGSNAKE

Lampropeltis rhombomaculata

Order: Squamata
Family: Colubridae
FNAI Ranks: G5/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 55–70 in *L. rhombomaculata* (vs. 75 or more in the south Florida species, *L. occipitomaculata*). The dorsal color is variable, commonly light gray, brown, or orange, and the belly is gray or yellow to pinkish and may be mottled. 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. Banded water snakes (*Nerodia fasciata*) have reddish to brown crossbands rather than isolated blotches, keeled dorsal scales, a divided cloacal, and generally a darker ground color.

Habitat: *L. rhombomaculata* inhabits a variety of upland communities, principally sandhill, upland pine and hardwood forests, and mesic flatwoods, although individuals may enter seepage bogs and grassy wetlands; most sites have relatively

open canopies (Krysko et al. 2019). The species adapts to ruderal situations, including fields that at least once supported agriculture. This snake 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 is reduced in colder months.

Florida Distribution: *L. rhombomaculata* occurs in the western half of the Panhandle, from Escambia County to counties bordering the eastern side of the Apalachicola River (Krysko et al. 2019).

Range-wide Distribution: The range of the species encompasses most states in the southeastern U.S., with a distribution extending from Mississippi and southeastern Louisiana to as far north as Maryland.

Conservation Status: Because of its secretive habits, the species' true conservation status is problematic. It likely has declined in at least parts of its range in conjunction with destruction, degradation, and development of habitat for agriculture, forestry, mining, industry, and human habitation, although it can adapt to some ruderal situations. 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, but its significance is difficult to measure. There are relatively 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 especially important given potential confusion with 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. Larger such units in Florida include Eglin and Tyndall air force bases; Blackwater River, Pine Log, and Tate's Hell state forests; and Apalachicola National Forest. 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. To the extent possible, manage lands within 10 km of known records in a manner to protect natural ecosystem qualities.

Northern Mole Kingsnake

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References: Krysko et al. 2019, McKelvy and Burbrink 2017, Powell et al. 2016, Tennant 1997.



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