

Kingsnake Care and Husbandry

What's the correct temperature and housing requirements for my Kingsnake?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

I just got a new 2- or 3-month-old California kingsnake. I'm pretty sure it's a female, if that makes any difference to my question. My question is about her conditions. Right now, I have fir ReptiBark from Zoo Med, an undertank heat pad, a water bowl and a nice stick in her enclosure. I've only had her for about three hours now, but because it's winter, she has burrowed into the bark. The thermometer has gone to about a maximum temperature of about 85 degrees Fahrenheit. Now it's about 84. I was wondering if that was OK because I read on the thermometer that it was supposed to be 85 to 95 degrees for desert animals. On a website for just for kingsnakes and milksnakes, it says between 80 to 85 degrees. How long should she hibernate? What should I do to feed her during hibernation? What other tips can you give me for the best care of my little snake?

Congrats on the purchase of your new kingsnake! They are wonderful animals, and once you get the husbandry and feeding down, you should enjoy a long and fun relationship with your new pet.

Let's get some of the basics straight. First off, you are keeping your new snake too warm. I spoke with Gino Sassani, of Lost World Reptiles, a client of mine who breeds these snakes, and he recommends keeping a kingsnake at 75 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit, with a maximum temperature of 85 degrees. Ninety-five degrees is way too high for kingsnakes.

It is better to have a temperature gradient in the habitat, which is difficult to provide when using a heating pad under the terrarium. Sassani recommends using a reflector lamp with a 40-watt incandescent light bulb on one side of the habitat, and the water bowl and a hide box on the other side of the tank. Make sure that your snake cannot touch or get too close to the light bulb, to prevent burns. You didn't mention if you had a hidebox in your snake's habitat, but if you haven't provided one, that is probably why the snake is trying to hide under the bark.

While it is nice to have some cage "furniture" in the habitat, kingsnakes are considered primarily ground snakes, and do not tend to spend a lot of time climbing. They are not arboreal, which means living in trees. That is not to say that they may not climb up a branch while exploring their habitat, but they do not spend a great deal of time climbing.

I don't think that your new snake is trying to hibernate, which they do not do anyway. I believe that it is only trying to hide itself, so once your snake is provided with a hidebox, it will prefer to spend its time in there, I'll bet. Kingsnakes do not hibernate; the proper term for their winter-time cool-down is called "brumation." There is a big difference. Brumation is usually necessary for bringing a kingsnake into breeding mode, and involves cooling an adult snake down to a temperature in the mid to lower 50s for a period of time in order to simulate their natural environmental temperatures. But, you should not be brumating a baby kingsnake anyway, as it needs to eat and grow.

Hopefully, once you change the setup for your new snake, it will settle in and begin eating and thriving. I hope your snake was already feeding well prior to you acquiring it. When you feed your kingsnake, resist the temptation to handle it for about three days afterwards, in order for it to best digest its meal. Clean out the cage regularly, monitor the temperature range, clean and change the water bowl daily, and offer your snake an appropriate sized pinky mouse twice a week.

It would also be a great idea to ask your parents if it would be OK to schedule a well-snake examination with a qualified herp veterinarian for a check-up and fecal parasite exam. That way, your vet can ensure that your new snake is healthy. He or she can also then examine the habitat and your snake's heating and lighting, and make any additional recommendations.

Well, I hope that answers all your pressing questions. I think the most important things for you to do right now are to acquire a hidebox and change the heating method. Then you'll be on your way!

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Need a Herp Vet?

If you are looking for a herp-knowledgeable veterinarian in your area, a good place to start is by checking the list of members on the Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarian (ARAV) web site at www.arav.com. Look for DVMs

who appear to maintain actual veterinary offices that you could contact.