Lampropeltis triangulum

Say & Richards, 1840 | Family: Colubridae

Non-Venomous - Oviparous - Terrestrial - Colubrid

MILK SNAKE

COMPLETE KEEPER'S CARE GUIDE

ORIGIN	ADULT SIZE	LIFESPAN	LEVEL
North & Central America	24" to 72" by subspecies	15-20 years in captivity	Beginner Friendly

QUICK FACTS

Scientific Name	Lampropeltis triangulum (Say & Richards, 1840)
Family	Colubridae - Kingsnakes & Milksnakes
Popular Subspecies	Eastern, Pueblan (Campbell's), Sinaloan, Honduran, Black Milk Snake
Origin	Southeastern Canada through the U.S., Mexico, Central America, and into northern South America
Habitat	Forest edges, rocky hillsides, meadows, agricultural land; tropical forest in southern subspecies
Adult Length	24"-36" for most common subspecies; up to 60"-72" for Honduran and Black Milk Snake
Adult Weight	Approximately 100-600 g depending on subspecies and sex
Lifespan (Captivity)	15-20 years with proper care; some individuals exceed 20 years
Experience Level	Beginner - one of the most forgiving colubrids for new keepers
Temperament	Generally docile once settled; hatchlings may be defensive but tame with regular handling
Venom	Non-venomous - constrictors; musking is a common defensive behavior
Conservation Status	Least Concern - wide distribution; no formal IUCN listing for the species

SUBSPECIES NOTE: This guide covers general husbandry for commonly kept milk snakes. Tropical subspecies (Honduran, Black Milk Snake) require 60-80% humidity compared to 40-60% for temperate subspecies (Eastern, Pueblan, Sinaloan). Always research the specific subspecies you are keeping.

NATURAL HISTORY

The milk snake holds the distinction of having one of the widest natural ranges of any snake in the Western Hemisphere, stretching from the forests of southeastern Canada all the way south to the grasslands and tropical zones of Ecuador and Colombia. This extraordinary range has produced remarkable ecological and morphological diversity across the species' many subspecies - from the compact, cold-tolerant Eastern Milk Snake of the northeastern United States to the large, rain forest-dwelling Honduran Milk Snake of Central America.

Across their range, milk snakes favor habitats with ample concealment: rocky outcroppings, rotting logs, loose debris piles, forest floors, and agricultural land where rodent populations are abundant. They are largely nocturnal and crepuscular, spending daylight hours tucked under cover and becoming most active after dark. This behavior translates directly into their captive care needs - they thrive when given multiple hides and a substrate deep enough to allow natural burrowing behavior.

Perhaps the milk snake's most recognizable feature is its tricolor banding of red, black, and white or yellow - a pattern that closely mimics the appearance of the venomous coral snake, a textbook example of Batesian mimicry. Despite the visual resemblance, milk snakes are entirely non-venomous. Their common name comes from an old folk myth that they frequented barns to drink cow's milk - in reality, they were drawn by the rodent populations sheltering in those locations.

Milk snakes have been kept and bred in captivity since the 1970s and remain one of the most established colubrid species in the hobby. Selective breeding has produced a range of color morphs, most notably in the Pueblan (Campbell's) and Sinaloan subspecies, which are widely available as captive-bred animals.

HOUSING

Enclosure Type & Size

Milk snakes are terrestrial constrictors that require horizontal floor space over vertical height. Security is paramount - milk snakes are persistent escape artists that will exploit any gap in a lid or door latch. Front-opening enclosures or top-opening tanks with securely clipped lids are both appropriate. Screen tops allow too much humidity to escape; if used, cover a portion of the screen with a solid panel to retain moisture.

Hatchling / Juvenile	10-20 gallon or equivalent; approximately 24" x 12" x 10"
Sub-adult (1-2 years)	20-30 gallon; approximately 30" x 12" x 12"
Adult (most subspecies)	40 BR or equivalent; 36" x 18" x 12" minimum
Adult - large ssp.	Honduran / Black Milk Snake: 48" x 24" x 16" minimum

> *KEEPER TIP: Avoid placing young snakes in oversized enclosures without sufficient hides. Too much open space causes stress and leads to feeding refusal. Upsize the enclosure gradually as the snake grows.*

Substrate

A quality substrate supports natural burrowing and helps maintain appropriate humidity. Best options:

- **Topsoil/coconut fiber blend (60/40)** - excellent moisture retention, allows burrowing, bioactive-compatible
- **Aspen shavings** - clean, affordable, easy to spot-clean; best for drier temperate subspecies
- **Cypress mulch** - holds humidity well; strong choice for tropical subspecies

- **Organic topsoil with leaf litter** - ideal for naturalistic or bioactive setups

> *AVOID: Cedar and pine shavings contain aromatic oils that are irritating to a snake's skin and respiratory tract. Never use these substrates with any snake.*

Hides & Decor

Milk snakes are secretive animals that rarely feel secure in open space. Adequate hides are one of the most critical welfare elements in their enclosure setup.

- Provide a minimum of **two hides** - one on the warm side, one on the cool side
- Hides should be **snug fitting** - just large enough for the snake to coil inside comfortably
- Include a **humid hide** on the cool side lined with damp sphagnum moss - essential for clean sheds
- Cork bark, half-logs, artificial foliage, and smooth rocks all make excellent additional cover
- A denser, more decorated enclosure consistently produces a more confident, less defensive animal

Temperature

A proper thermal gradient is essential. Milk snakes thermoregulate by moving between warm and cool zones. Always use a thermostat on any heat source to prevent thermal burns or dangerous overheating.

Warm Side (ambient)	80-85 F (27-29 C)
Cool Side (ambient)	72-76 F (22-24 C)
Basking Spot	85-90 F (29-32 C) - optional for most subspecies
Night Drop	68-72 F (20-22 C) - a modest drop is natural and beneficial
Black Milk Snake	74-76 F (23-24 C) throughout - this cool-climate subspecies is intolerant of high heat
CRITICAL	Never allow warm-side ambient to exceed 90 F - heat stress can be fatal

Heat is best provided by an under-tank heater (UTH) on a thermostat positioned under one side of the enclosure, or an overhead radiant heat panel. Always verify surface temperatures with a digital probe thermometer rather than relying on ambient air readings alone.

Humidity

Temperate subspecies	40-60% RH (Eastern, Pueblan, Sinaloan, most commonly kept subspecies)
Tropical subspecies	60-80% RH (Honduran, Black Milk Snake, and other Central/South American ssp.)
During shedding	Increase by 10-15% above normal range; ensure humid hide is damp and available
Monitor with	Digital probe hygrometer - place probe at mid-enclosure height

Humidity is maintained through substrate moisture, a large water dish, and light misting as needed. Substrate that naturally retains some moisture - topsoil, cypress mulch, or coconut fiber blends - provides the most hands-off approach to humidity stability. Consistently low humidity is the primary cause of poor sheds and retained eye caps.

Lighting

Milk snakes are primarily nocturnal and do not require dedicated UVB lighting to survive in captivity. However, current research supports that low-level UVB exposure (T5 HO Forest 6% or equivalent) benefits long-term welfare and

metabolic health. At minimum, maintain a consistent 12-hour light / 12-hour dark photoperiod using any standard ambient light source. If UVB is provided, position it over the warm half of the enclosure without mesh obstruction reducing output.

FEEDING

Prey & Sizing

Milk snakes are obligate carnivores that thrive on appropriately sized whole prey. Pre-killed or frozen/thawed feeders are strongly recommended over live prey - live rodents can injure snakes, and F/T feeders eliminate parasite risk and are more convenient to store. Thaw frozen prey completely to room temperature or slightly above before offering.

Prey diameter should not exceed the widest point of the snake's mid-body. Hatchlings begin on pinky mice; adults of most subspecies consume adult mice or small rats.

Feeding Frequency

Hatchling (0-3 months)	One pinky mouse every 5-7 days
Juvenile (3-12 months)	One appropriately sized mouse every 7-10 days
Sub-adult (1-2 years)	One appropriately sized mouse every 10-14 days
Adult	One adult mouse or small rat every 14 days; adjust based on body condition

CRITICAL: Milk snakes are ophiophagous in the wild and will eat other snakes in captivity. Never house two milk snakes together - cannibalism is a genuine risk even between animals of similar size.

Refusal & Fasting Notes

- A newly acquired snake may refuse food for 2-4 weeks while acclimating; do not handle during this period
- Refusal is normal during active shed cycles - never offer prey when eyes are opaque or skin appears dull
- Adults may fast naturally for several weeks in fall and winter, mirroring pre-brumation behavior
- Persistent refusal beyond 4-6 weeks warrants a full husbandry review: temperatures, hides, and stress sources
- Feed inside the enclosure; removing snakes to separate feeding containers can create defensive feeding responses
- Wait at least **48 hours** after a meal before handling to prevent regurgitation

WATER

Fresh, clean water must be available at all times. The dish should be large enough for the snake to submerge its entire body - milk snakes soak regularly, particularly before a shed and when enclosure humidity is lower than ideal. A heavy ceramic dish helps prevent tipping. Change water every 1-2 days or immediately after it is soiled. Position the dish on the cool side of the enclosure to slow bacterial growth in standing water.

HANDLING

Milk snakes are among the more handleable colubrid species once settled into captivity. Hatchlings are often initially defensive - musking, thrashing, and occasionally striking - but most individuals calm significantly with regular, calm, and consistent interaction. Scooping from below with both hands and keeping the animal over a surface reduces falls, which can injure young snakes.

- **Settling period:** allow at least 2 weeks undisturbed before the first handling session

- **Session length:** 10-15 minutes, once or twice per week - enough to maintain tameness without stress
- **Maximum frequency:** no more than once daily; snakes need downtime
- **Do not handle:** within 48 hours of feeding, during active shed, or during brumation
- Support the snake's full body length - never restrain by neck or tail alone
- Wash hands before and after every session
- Children should always handle snakes under direct adult supervision

SHEDDING (ECDYSIS)

Signs of an Upcoming Shed

- Eyes become cloudy, bluish, or opaque - called being 'in blue'
- Overall skin color appears dull or washed out compared to normal
- Activity decreases; the snake may spend more time than usual in hides
- Appetite typically drops or stops entirely - do not attempt feeding during shed
- Soaking in the water dish more frequently than normal

During the Process

After the 'blue' phase, the eyes will temporarily clear before the actual shed begins - this is normal and can mislead new keepers into thinking the shed is already complete. The snake will typically shed within 2-5 days of eye clearing. Avoid handling during this window. Ensure the humid hide is moist and the water dish is filled.

Post-Shed Care

- Confirm the shed came off as a single complete piece, including both eye caps (spectacles)
- Retained eye caps or patches of stuck skin indicate humidity was too low - increase humidity and provide a supervised warm soak (85-90 F)
- Do not attempt to manually remove stuck eye caps without veterinary guidance - the risk of permanent eye damage is high
- Wait 48 hours after a successful shed before resuming feeding
- Shed frequency varies: hatchlings shed every 3-4 weeks; adults every 6-10 weeks

HEALTH & COMMON ISSUES

Respiratory Infection	Wheezing, clicking sounds, mucus at the mouth or nostrils, mouth gaping, lethargy. Most often triggered by sustained low temperatures or excessive humidity. Requires veterinary care.
Mites	Tiny dark specks on the snake's skin or prolonged soaking in the water dish. Mites feed on blood and cause serious stress. Treat with a reptile-safe mite product and deep-clean the enclosure.
Dysecdysis (Stuck Shed)	Patches of unshed skin or retained eye caps. Almost always caused by insufficient humidity. Provide a supervised warm soak and a moist hide. Retained eye caps require veterinary assistance.
Mouth Rot (Stomatitis)	White pus-like deposits inside the mouth; swelling; reluctance to eat. Often caused by a dirty enclosure or physical injury. Requires antibiotic treatment from a reptile veterinarian.
Internal Parasites	Weight loss, regurgitation, loose stools, lethargy. An annual fecal exam is strongly recommended, especially for newly acquired animals or rescues.
Scale Rot	Red, blistered, or infected ventral scales caused by substrate that is too wet and/or dirty. Reduce moisture, deep-clean the enclosure, and consult a vet for moderate to severe cases.

> *QUARANTINE: Any new milk snake should be isolated for a minimum of 60-90 days before being placed near other reptiles. Schedule a fecal exam with a reptile veterinarian during this period.*

BREEDING

Sexual Maturity & Conditioning

Captive-bred milk snakes typically reach sexual maturity at 2-3 years of age. Waiting until females are at least 3 feet in length with solid body condition reduces breeding-related stress and improves reproductive success. Males can be introduced at 18-24 months if healthy and feeding reliably. Both animals should be well-conditioned before any brumation is initiated.

Brumation Protocol

Brumation simulates the natural winter cool-down that triggers reproductive hormones and female ovulation. It is optional for general maintenance but strongly recommended to reliably produce eggs.

Pre-brumation	Feed heavily for 4-6 weeks; stop feeding 2 weeks before cooling to allow the gut to clear
Cooling period	8-12 weeks; typically November through February
Temperature	Gradually reduce to 58-65 F (15-18 C) over 1-2 weeks; remove supplemental heat
Light cycle	Reduce to 8-10 hours light per day to mirror natural winter photoperiod
Water	Fresh water must remain available throughout - snakes will drink but not eat
Emerging	Gradually warm back to normal temperatures over 2-3 weeks; resume feeding

Mating & Egg Laying

- Introduce the male into the female's enclosure after both animals are actively feeding following brumation
- Breeding typically occurs March-April; multiple pairings over 2-3 weeks increase success rates
- Females undergo a pre-lay shed approximately 2-3 weeks before egg deposition - monitor closely after this shed
- Provide a lay box filled with moistened sphagnum moss or substrate for gravid females
- Clutch size: 5-15 eggs depending on subspecies, age, and female condition
- Incubation: 80-84 F at 85-90% humidity; typical hatch time is 50-70 days
- Separate hatchlings immediately after hatching - they will cannibalize siblings

SOURCES & ATTRIBUTION

This guide was compiled using commonly accepted husbandry practices from experienced keepers and industry-standard reptile care resources.

> *Always consult a qualified reptile veterinarian for any health concerns. The information in this guide reflects keeper consensus and current best practices but is not a substitute for professional veterinary advice.*