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COLUBRIDAE

Philothamnus

(A. Smith, 1847)

PREDATION

B. MARITZ

On 25 January 2018, Mrs M. Wright-Ingle of Richard's Bay, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa (2832CA; exact address not disclosed) observed a California kingsnake (*Lampropeltis califoniae*) capture and consume a wild, native Green snake, *Philothamnus* sp. (Fig. 1) in her garden. The Kingsnake was left to complete the meal and presumably escape back into the garden. The observation was posted on social

media, where it was brought to the author's attention. This is the first reported evidence of consumption of a native predator by a non-native snake that is likely to have originated from the pet trade in southern Africa.

California Kingsnakes (*Lampropeltis californiae*, formerly *L. getula californiae*) are medium-sized (typically 700-1000 mm total length) constrictors that are native to North America, occurring from northern California, southwards to north-western Mexico (Stebbins 2003). These snakes are generalist predators, consuming a wide range of prey, including small mammals, birds (including eggs), amphibians, and reptiles including other snakes (Stebbins 2003). *Lampropeltis* spp. including *L. californiae* are common in the South African pet trade, with even a cursory web search revealing advertisements for adult and hatchling animals for sale. The total number of individual *L. californiae* in captivity in South Africa is unknown, but estimates from local snake breeders suggest thousands to tens of thousands of individuals (J. Marais, pers comm). The prevalence of these animals in the pet trade and the propensity for captive snakes to escape has resulted in numerous escapee animals being reported on social media, searchable on www.facebook.com/groups/snakesofsouthafrica, and in the formal literature (Bates *et al.* 2014). These records are likely to represent only a small proportion of the total number of escapees suggesting that this observation is unlikely to be an isolated event.

Although seemingly innocuous, this



Figure 1: California Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis californiae*) photographed in Richards Bay, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa in the process of consuming a green snake of the genus *Philothamnus*. Photo: M Wright-Ingle.

observation is ecologically significant as it provides evidence for an escapee non-native species interacting with indigenous fauna.

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