

CAPTIVE CARE OF BOA CONSTRICTORS

(Boa constrictor imperator)

Natural History

The name "Red-Tail Boa" has commonly been used by pet stores and snake aficionados to detract the public's attention from the fact that their proper name is "boa constrictor". Many people who do not know much about snakes are fearful of all "constrictors," especially large constrictors; *Red-Tail Boa* sounds much less threatening. In fact, not all boa constrictors are red-tailed. While some boas on the market are true red-tailed boa constrictors (*Boa constrictor constrictor*) imported from Brazil, Peru, Guyana, Surinam and with a few coming from very limited areas in Colombia, most are actually *Boa constrictor imperator* from Colombia, with a few coming in from Mexico, Hogg Island and countries throughout Central America. There are six other subspecies of *B. constrictor* from South America, which are rarely found in the retail and private pet trade.

Ranging from the high cloud forests to the dry low lands, these beautifully marked snakes are only moderately arboreal. Frequently found near human habitation (due to the quantity of rodents found near human habitats), Boas are primarily nocturnal or crepuscular (active at dawn and dusk). In the extreme northern and southern portions of their range, the Boas will often go through several weeks of inactivity to get through the periods of extreme cold or drought, a behavior that may be observed in captivity as the weather changes throughout the year. Those snakes living in the consistently high humid temperatures of the rain forest areas will remain active throughout the year.

Boas devour a variety of prey in the wild - amphibians, lizards, other snakes, birds and mammals. In captivity, they should be fed pre-killed mice, rats and as adults, rabbits and chickens. You can buy the rodents and rabbits at pet stores; these animals have been specially raised and are clean, healthy and well nourished. Chickens can be purchased at hatcheries; do not feed raw chicken pieces purchased at the grocery store - up to 80% of it may be infected with *Salmonella* bacteria. Chickens from hatcheries should also be considered suspect due to the overcrowded conditions typical of most hatcheries; check the hatchery out first before you buy. Under no circumstances should you feed your snakes wild-caught prey items. Wild rodents and other animals carry a variety of parasites and bacteria for which your snake has no immunity. If you cannot afford to buy the proper food, you should not buy the snake.

That cute little 2 ounce, 14-22" hatchling laying cupped in the palm of your hand will increase its size by up to 300% in its first year, reaching 5-6 feet during that time. The following year will add another 3-4 feet to its length, as well as several pounds. After the second year, the growth rate slows down significantly, but snakes do continue to grow, however slightly, during their entire lives. The live bearing females will give birth to 10-60 young (depending upon the subspecies) after a gestational period of 4-10 months (depending upon temperature and several other factors). Unlike most big snakes, many female Boas do not bear young each year.

Selecting Your Boa Constrictor

Choose an animal that has clear firm skin, rounded body shape, clean vent, clear eyes, and who actively flicks its tongue around when handled. When held, the snake should grip you gently but firmly when moving around. It should be alert to its surroundings. All young snakes are food for other, larger snakes, birds, lizards and mammalian predators so your hatchling may be a bit nervous at first but should settle down quickly. Like the pythons, Boas have anal spurs. These single claws appearing on either side of the vent are the vestigial remains of the hind legs snakes lost during their evolution from lizard to snake millions of years ago. Males have longer spurs than do the females. There is little difference in temperament between the two sexes. Imported Colombian *B. c. imperator* and *B. c. constrictor* are the nicest, least aggressive of all the Boas. The other true red-tails tend to be testy and aggressive. Captive-bred Boas of all subspecies tend to be more docile than their wild-caught counterparts.

Getting Started

Snake-Proof Enclosure

Select an enclosure especially designed for housing snakes, such as those with the combination fixed screen/hinged glass top. All snakes are escape artists; Boas are especially powerful and can easily break out of a tank sealed with a board and a couple of bricks. A good starter tank for a hatchling is a 20-gallon tank. After the first couple of years, you will have to build your own enclosure out of wood and glass or Plexiglas or purchase a tank made by producers of large reptile enclosures. Be prepared - big snakes need lots of room, not the least of which is an enclosure big enough for you to get in and clean it out!

Suitable substrate

Use paper towels at first. These are easily and quickly removed and replaced when soiled and, with an import, will allow you to better monitor for the presence of mites and the condition of the feces. Once the animal is established, you can use more decorative ground cover such as commercially prepared shredded cypress or fir bark. Pine, cedar and aspen shavings should not be used as they can become lodged in the mouth while eating, causing respiratory and other problems. The bark must be monitored closely and all soiled and wet portions pulled out immediately to prevent bacteria and fungus growths. The utilitarian approach is to use inexpensive AstroTurf. Extra pieces of AstroTurf can be kept in reserve and used when the soiled piece is removed for cleaning and drying (soak in a solution of two tablespoons of household bleach in for each gallon of water; rinse thoroughly, and dry completely before reuse). Remember: the easier it is to clean, the faster you'll do it!

Hiding Place

A hiding place should be provided for Boas. A half-log (available at pet stores), an empty cardboard box or upside-down opaque plastic container, both with an access doorway cut into one end, can also be used. The plastic is easily cleaned when necessary; the box can be tossed out when soiled and replaced with a new one. Many Boas enjoy hanging out on branches; provide clean branches big enough to support the Boa's weight. If you use a found branch, soak first in the bleach/water solution, then clean water to thoroughly rinse; place in cage only when completely dry. If you use rocks and bricks to construct a cave, be sure to affix them firmly in place. Boas are very strong, and can easily topple such a structure when moving about. When the rocks tumble on the snake, severe injuries may result.

Temperature Gradient

The proper temperature range is essential in keeping your snake healthy. The ambient daytime air temperature throughout the enclosure must be maintained between 82-90 F (28-32 C), with a basking area kept at 90-95 F (32-35 C). At night, the ambient air temperature may be allowed to drop down no lower than 78-85 F (26-30 C). Special reptile heating pads that are manufactured to maintain a temperature about 20° higher than the air temperature may be used inside the enclosure. There are adhesive pads that can be stuck to the underside of a glass enclosure. Heating pads made for people, available at all drug stores, are also available; these have built-in high-medium-low switches and can be used under a glass enclosure. You can also use incandescent light bulbs in porcelain and metal reflector hoods to provide the additional heat required for the basking area, or the new ceramic heating elements which can be put into regular light sockets and radiate heat downward. All lights must be screened off to prevent the snake from burning itself. All snakes are susceptible to thermal burns. For this same reason do not use a hot rock. Buy at least two thermometers - one to use in the overall area 1" above the enclosure floor, and the other 1" above the floor in the basking area. Ideally, you should place a third thermometer at near the upper basking bench or branch. Don't try to guess the temperature--you will end up with a snake that will be too cold to eat and digest its food. Once your snake has grown quite large, you may wish to invest in a pig blanket, a large rigid pad for which you can buy a thermostat to better control the temperature.

No special lighting is needed

You may use a full-spectrum light or low wattage incandescent bulb in the enclosure during the day but your snake, having evolved to living underground, has no need for regular full-spectrum/UV lighting. If you do use such a light in the tank, make sure the snake cannot get into direct contact with the light bulbs, nor burrow itself into the casing of the fluorescent hood.

Feeding

Allow your snake to acclimate for a couple of weeks to its new home. Start your hatchling off with a single pre-killed week to 10-day old "fuzzy" rat. A smaller sized hatchling may require a small mouse. Larger Boas may be fed larger pre-killed rats. The rule of thumb is that you can feed prey items that are no wider than the widest part of the snake's body. While Boas will often gladly eat prey that is actually too large for it, they will generally regurgitate the prey item one or more days later. Not a pretty sight. If you have not had any experience force feeding a snake, you may not want to try it yourself until you have seen someone do it. Force-feeding should be an action of last resort, as it is very stressful for the snake--and the owner! It is very easy to overfeed captive snakes, especially the boas and pythons, as they do not get enough opportunity to exercise and burn calories in captivity as they do in the wild. Be judicious--your snake will get big and impressive soon enough. Feed it enough to keep it healthy, not obese.

Provide fresh water

Keep a bowl of fresh water available at all times. Your snake will both drink and soak, and may defecate, in it. Check it often and change it as needed. A warm bath in your bathtub will also be welcomed just before your Boa is ready to shed.

Veterinary Care

Routine veterinary screening for newly acquired snakes is essential. Many of the parasites infesting Boas and other reptiles can be transmitted to humans and other reptiles. Left untreated, such infestations can ultimately kill your snake. When your snake first defecates, collect the feces in a clean plastic bag, seal it, label it with the date, your name and phone number and the snake's name, and take it and your snake to a vet who is experienced with reptiles. Ask that it be tested for worms and protozoans, which are two different tests. If either test is positive, your Boa will be given medication given that you can repeat later at home.

Handling your new snake

After giving your Boa a couple of days to settle in, begin picking it up and handling it gently. It may move from you, and may threaten you by doing tail lashings and hissing. Be gentle but persistent. Daily contact will begin to establish a level of trust and confidence between you and your snake. When it is comfortable with you, you can begin taking it around the house. Don't get over-confident! Given a chance and close proximity to seat cushions, your Boa will make a run (well, a slither) for it, easing down between the cushions and from there, to points possibly unknown. Always be gentle, and try to avoid sudden movements. If the snake wraps around your arm or neck, you can unwind it by gently grasping it by the tail and unwrapping it from around you. If you start at the head, you will find that your snake is stronger than you are, or at least, more tenacious.

Necessities

Some things you should have on hand for general maintenance and first aid include: Nolvasan (Chlorhexidine diacetate) for cleaning enclosures and disinfecting food and water bowls, litter boxes, tubs and sinks etc. Betadine (povidone/iodine) for cleansing scratches and wounds. Set aside a food storage bowl, feeding and water bowls, soaking bowl or tub, even sponges, to be used only for your Boa.

Enjoy Yourselfes

You have a companion that will be a part of your life for a great many years if taken care of properly. Snakes should remain alert and active well into their old age. The main causes of death of snakes in captivity are directly related to their care: improper temperatures, contact with heating and lighting elements, no regular

access to water, lack of necessary veterinary care and treatment, careless handling--all things for which we, as their caretakers, are directly responsible.

Places to Go, Things to See and Learn:

Join your local herpetological society where you can meet other reptile owners, learn more about your boa and find an experienced reptile veterinarian in your area. You might also want to join one of the snake-related email discussion lists (<http://www.anapsid.org/lists.html>) and talk with other boa and python keepers. Check your local pet stores, library, and herp booksellers (<http://www.anapsid.org/herplit.html>) for these and other python and reptile care books:

- The General Care and Maintenance of Red-Tailed Boas, by Philippe de Vosjoli. 1990. Advanced Vivarium Systems, Lakeside CA.
- The Completely Illustrated Atlas of Reptiles and Amphibians, by Obst, Richter and Jacob. 1988. TFH Publications, Inc. Neptune City, NJ.
- Snakes of the World, by Scott Weidensaul. 1991. Chartwell Books, Seacacus, NJ.
- Living Snakes of the World, John M. Mehrtens. 1987. Sterling Publishing Co. New York.

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