

CAPTIVE CARE OF BOA CONSTRICTORS

(Boa constrictor imperator)

By Bonita Taylor

This care sheet is intended to get you started with your new snake. There is much more information regarding this species of reptile. To see recommended websites for more information, please visit one of the links on the last page of this care sheet.



Selecting Your Boa Constrictor

Be aware that many snakes sold in pet stores are imported. If you want to purchase a Captive Bred animal, you will need to contact a breeder. For comparisons on imported and captive bred reptiles, see the "Import vs. Captive Bred" article under Common Ailments at www.reptilerope.org/caresheets.html

Choose an animal that has clear firm skin, rounded body shape, clean vent, clear eyes, and who actively flicks its tongue around when handled. Most all young snakes are naturally shy about having their heads touched or handled by strangers. When held, the snake should grip you gently but firmly when moving around. 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.

The true red-tails tend to be testy and aggressive. Captive-bred Boas of all subspecies tend to be more docile than their wild-caught (true bloodline) counterparts.

Selecting an escape-proof enclosure

Select an enclosure especially designed for housing snakes, such as the glass tanks with the locking screen lids. 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 newborn is a 20-gallon tank. Offspring are very nervous and need smaller spaces for the first six months. As the snake grows you will need to house it in something suitable for its size. The habitat width and length should not equal less than the length of the snake. For example, if you have a 3ft snake, then the width can be 12" and the length can be 24". It is ok to house an adult snake in an enclosure larger than its length. After four or so 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! Maximum, average size for a female boa is 12 feet and 10 feet for a male boa. There are always exceptions. Some breeders have raised female boas reaching up to 15 feet!

Select a 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 cypress mulch, pine, and aspen shavings. However, be aware that the use of such substrates will result in the need to feed the snake in a separate container preventing the risk of indigestion and other problems. Other substrates, such as cedar and potting soil, have chemicals that are harmful to most reptiles and are strongly advised against.

Another efficient approach is to use inexpensive Astroturf. Extra pieces can be kept in reserve and used when the soiled piece is removed for cleaning and drying (soak in one gallon of water to which you have added two tablespoon of household bleach; rinse thoroughly, and dry completely before reuse). Remember: the easier it is to clean, the faster you'll do it!

Provide a hiding place

A half-log is available at pet stores. An empty cardboard box or upside-down opaque plastic container (unused kitty litter pan), 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. The box or log must be big enough for the snake to hide its entire body inside; you will need to eventually replace it as your snake grows. Boas like to be aware of their surroundings. Don't be surprised if you catch it peeking out the entry of its hide. Place a nice rock or two in the tank; your boa will use this to shed against.

Keeping it warm

Proper temperature range is essential to keeping your snake healthy. The ambient air temperature throughout the enclosure must be maintained between 78-83F-during the day, with a basking area kept at 85-87F. At night, the ambient air temperature on the coolest side may be allowed to drop down no lower than 72F only if a basking area of at least 80F remains available. Heating pads made for people, available at all drug stores, are also available; these have built-in hi-med-lo switches and can be used under a glass enclosure. The heating pad must be warm to the touch and you must be able to hold your hand over the pad for at least five minutes. Periodically test the temperatures in the enclosure in several areas of the enclosure. Use thermometers; don't try to guess the temperature - you will either end up with a snake that will be too cold to eat and digest its food or one ill or dead from overheating.

Lighting

No special lighting is needed. To make it easier to see your boa during the day, you can use a full-spectrum light or low wattage incandescent bulb in the enclosure during the day. Make sure the snake cannot get into direct contact with the light bulbs, as boas are very prone to getting seriously burned. Respect your boa's needs and be sure to provide a hide box, and expect them to use it!



Feeding

FOOD: Allow your snake to acclimate to its new home for a few days. Start your offspring (about 15" in length) off with a single pre-killed one-week to 10-day old "fuzzy" mouse. A smaller sized offspring may require a smaller mouse; try a pre-killed 5-day old. 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 your boa does not eat right away, give him at least another week before you offer again.

FEEDING ENVIRONMENT: It is good to get in the habit of removing your snake from his enclosure and putting him in a clear tub with an opaque lid. This helps you and your snake to develop a feeding "relationship". Snakes are very habitual and if you get them in the habit of eating in a tub, then they are less likely to respond with strikes every time you open their cage. The tub only needs to be half the length of the snake. For problem feeders, you can leave the food in the tub and cover the tub with a dark towel or sheet. Leave them alone with the food for a maximum of 2 hours. If they have not eaten, then you can wait another week and try again or move on to other options, such as B12 shots (for appetite stimulant) or force-feeding.

FORCE-FEEDING: You must not wait too long if your snake is not eating. Your snake could die from force-feeding if it is not strong enough to digest. Six weeks is the maximum your baby boa should go without feeding. 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, whether of a mouse or with a formula inserted by catheter and syringe, is very stressful for the snake (and it isn't much fun for the owner!). If your boa has gone several months without eating and is beginning to noticeably lose weight, take it to a reptile vet. If you feel you must force feed your snake, use the tail of a pre-killed mouse or small rat. It is easy to feed and it will give your snake something to digest until you can seek more help. However, this is not a good staple diet for your snake. Your snake will not be able to survive on tails, so it must get nutrition from elsewhere.

Water

Provide a bowl of fresh water at all times. Your snake will both drink and soak, and may defecate, in it. Check it daily and change when soiled. Soaking is especially good just before a shed. When they eyes clear from their milky opaque, or "blue" state, soak the snake in a tub of warm water for ten minutes or so, then lightly dry it off, and return it immediately to its tank; it should shed cleanly within twenty-four hours. For problem sheds, use a dash of mineral oil in the warm water. For eye cap problems, use non-diluted mineral oil on a cotton swab and gently dap the eyes with the swab and immediately place the snake back in its tank--do not wipe off mineral oil.

Conclusion

Knowing what to expect during the life of your boa is an essential part of good health for your snake. Having knowledge of adult size, potential health problems related directly to this species, and the average behavioral patterns of this species can help you to maintain a good relationship with your boa. Do as much research as you can and find a vet that will treat your snake prior to any problems.

Recommended Sources for the Care of Boa Constrictors:

- Melissa Kaplan's www.anapsid.org
- The Boophile Breeder, www.theboophile.com
- Breeder and information source, www.redtailboas.net
- Association of Reptile and Amphibian Veterinarians, www.arav.org