



Boa Constrictors

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The Common or Red-tailed Boa (*Boa constrictor constrictor*) originates from the rainforests of Southern America, where it can be found in a variety of places from the forest floor to trees, and even in water at times. Anyone thinking of owning a boa should carefully consider the size of an adult snake (at least 2.5-3m), and the time, commitment, space and expense which owning one will entail.

Scientific Classification

Boa constrictors belong to the Order Squamata, Suborder Serpentes/Ophidia, Family Boidae, Genus Boa

General care

A wooden/chipboard vivarium with good ventilation and sliding glass doors makes the most appropriate setup for snakes, being easy to clean, insulate and keep secure. The minimum recommended size for an adult boa constrictor would be 1.5m long x 1.2m deep x 1.2m high, but obviously these snakes will enjoy as large an enclosure as it is practical to keep.

Inside the vivarium, a hiding place should be provided which may be half a log, a purpose built cave or even just an empty box with a hole cut in the side. Branches can also be placed for climbing but should be at least one and a half times the diameter of your snake's body.

Hygiene

A vivarium should be "spot-cleaned" daily to remove any droppings, or uneaten food. Once a week, the whole vivarium can be cleaned with a disinfectant suitable for reptiles (further details of suitable disinfectants can be obtained from your vet). It is important to always wash your hands thoroughly after handling reptiles as they can carry Salmonella.

Substrate

It is important to use a substrate that is easy to keep clean and replace, and is not going to cause a problem if accidentally eaten. Newspaper therefore makes the ideal substrate, but another alternative would be certain types of shavings or wood chips.

Temperature

Reptiles are not capable of regulating their own temperature so it is very important to keep their environment at an appropriate temperature at all times. A temperature gradient should therefore be provided, giving your reptile a hot end where they can bask and a cooler end to which they can retreat.

There are several types of heat sources available for vivariums including ceramic heaters (infra red light bulbs), tube heaters, reflector bulbs (incandescent spot lights) and heat mats. Incandescent spot lights will provide the ideal basking spot for your snake, but should not be used as the sole heating source whereas heat mats are more useful in providing a background heat for the whole vivarium.

It is important whichever form of heating is chosen, to always monitor it carefully with a thermometer, and use some form of thermostat so that temperature can be accurately controlled. Heat sources should also be protected with a wire mesh guard or similar safety device if they are within a snake's reach.

The ideal temperature range at which to keep a boa constrictor would be **28-30°C (82-86°F)** in the daytime, with a basking spot of **31-32°C (88-90°F)**, and temperatures falling no lower than **26°C (80°F)** at night.



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Humidity

This should ideally be measured with a hygrometer and kept moderate (50-80%) for these snakes that are used to a rainforest environment.

Lighting

Most reptiles need to have access to both UVA and UVB rays, which many supposedly “full spectrum” reptile bulbs do not supply, so it is important to check this before purchasing a bulb. UVB rays are very important to allow a reptile to produce Vitamin D, which is essential for the absorption and use of calcium. Without this, lizards are at risk of developing Metabolic Bone Disease, which can often be fatal

It is controversial whether snakes actually require UV light or not, as naturally these reptiles are only active at evening and night times. Captivity however, can never simulate a totally natural environment and Metabolic Bone Disease is seen in snakes, so it is a good idea to provide UV light for 12 hours daily, but using a bulb with a lower output (2% should be sufficient) than that used for most other reptiles. Bulbs will need replacing every 6 months.

Diet

Boa constrictors are carnivores and in the wild their diet would naturally be a variety of amphibians, lizards, other snakes, birds and mammals. In captivity, they should be offered pre-killed whole food starting off with pinkies for hatchlings and progressing to adult mice, rats, rabbits and chickens for adult snakes. Adult snakes require feeding weekly.

It is illegal and unethical to offer snakes live vertebrate food.

Fresh water should be supplied once daily in a shallow bowl.

Lifespan

Boa constrictors can often live between 25-30 years.

Signs of Health

A healthy snake will be bright and alert with clear open eyes and nostrils and a clean vent. Skin should be undamaged with no sign of parasites, and shedding should occur regularly. Your snake should also be keen to eat and pass faeces regularly. It is important to become familiar with your snake's normal appearance, movement and behaviour, in order that signs of illness can be noticed at an early stage.

It is advisable to take your snake to a vet who routinely deals with reptiles for a general health check and faecal sample at least once a year.

Signs of Illness

Reptiles will often not show obvious signs of illness until they are very sick, but you should look out for any changes in appetite or faeces passed, as well as changes in weight, behaviour, skin colouration or breathing. Other signs of illness include discharges from the eyes, nose or mouth or problems with shedding.

If you have any concerns, do not hesitate to contact a reptile vet as soon as possible.

This caresheet is only intended as a general guideline, so please ask for further information.

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