



Boa Constrictor

Boa constrictor ssp.

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There are nine recognized subspecies of boa constrictor, with the most common in the pet trade being the Columbian or common boa constrictor, *Boa constrictor imperator* and the red-tailed boa, *Boa constrictor constrictor*. Boas are viviparous, which means the babies are born alive, of litters from 20-30 after 130-250 days (depending on female size). Boas are born at 15-20 inches long, breeding size occurs when they are 4-5 feet long, with a normal captivity size of 5-7 feet for males and 6-8 feet for females, occasionally reaching 10 feet. Boa constrictors can live over 40 years in captivity, but most live 20-30 years.

While properly handled boa constrictors can be quite docile, these are potentially dangerous animals so we recommend the following ground rules for all owners:

- 1). Never handle if over 8 ft in length without another person being present (1 handler/5 ft of snake).**
- 2). Never allow the snake to coil around the torso or neck.**
- 3). Never handle a large snake with alcohol in your system (when most bites occur!).**
- 4). Be especially careful during feeding time (don't smell like potential prey from handling food!).**
- 5). Never allow the snake free roam of the house.**
- 6). Always house the snake in a securely locked, escape-proof enclosure accessible only by you.**
- 7.) Never allow children around the snake without careful supervision.**

Husbandry concerns: Quarantine any new boas away from other animals for at least 6 months to minimize the risk of transmitting inclusion body disease, a virus affecting these species that is always fatal. Do not house with any other snakes (including members of the same species) to prevent exposure to new diseases and to minimize stress. Be sure to wash hands after and between handling snakes. Excessive handling while they are new should be avoided. However, once snakes are consistently eating, they should be handled frequently during the first year of life so they become comfortable with handling. Enclosures should be very escape-proof. As many predators in the wild attack snakes from above, enclosures with sliding glass fronts often work best while they are small. As they get larger, we

More on the back!

often need to build specialized cages to accommodate their large size potential. Cage size should be such that the sum of the length and width of the enclosure is less than the total length of the snake. Young boas can become intimidated by adult-sized cages. A cage with the longest side being no more than the length of the snake is most appropriate for the first year. Avoid building with wood products, as this makes potential mite, bacteria, virus, and fungus control more difficult. These boas are semi-arboreal, and like to have items to climb on. Make sure they are secure and do not collapse on the snake. Use a substrate of newspaper or flat indoor-outdoor carpet, avoid bark and similar substances, as snakes often eat them and this can cause intestinal impactions. Pine and cedar shavings should also be avoided as they contain substances which can be irritating to animals' skin, eyes and respiratory tract. The hide box is one of the most important parts of the cage. Boxes that can be thrown away and replaced, when the snake defecates and urinates (poops and pees), are helpful. The box should allow a tight fit for the snake, but also allow a way to get the snake out if needed. A ceramic heat lamp outside the cage can be used to provide heat (do not allow direct contact at all with the heat source) with a basking spot at 90-95°F, and the rest of cage cooling down to a cool end of 75°F. At night, as they are mostly nocturnal, make sure lights are off and allow the cage to cool down to 75°F. Place digital thermometers on the floor of the cage where the snake is! A reptile heat pad (No hot rocks) under (not in) the cage (with substrate keeping the snake from direct contact with the glass) can provide an accessory heat source at night and during the day.

Shedding: Occurs as the snake increases in size, in adults usually twice a year. Usually the eyes will cloud over several days before the shed, and at this time an otherwise gentle snake can become aggressive due to decreased vision and likely discomfort. Do not feed them at this time. The shed should come off in one or two pieces. Problems occur in animals with low humidity. A common problem with this is retained eye caps. We do not recommend you try to remove them, as the corneas of the eyes are easily damaged this way. Please schedule an appointment with your veterinarian if this problem occurs. Soak twice daily as described below when your snake enters shed behavior. Always check the shed to make sure the eye caps and the end of the tail are with it.

Soaking: Should be done daily in a warm water bath for 30 minutes in a plastic container with a lid. Make sure there are breathing holes, and that it is not so deep they can drown. This keeps them hydrated and stimulates defecation and helps prevent constipation. A large water bowl for drinking/bathing should be provided and changed daily. Normal humidity levels of 50-70% are recommended but may be difficult to maintain with good airflow, in some regions, making daily soaking necessary. A dark humidity box with sphagnum moss can be made but requires routine maintenance and upkeep to avoid drying out or bacterial or fungal growth.

Diet: With a new snake, minimize handling until they have eaten several times. This is a major reason they will not accept food. Pre-killed rodents are the best way to offer food, as live prey can bite and severely wound snakes very quickly. No other diet supplementation is necessary. Make sure the size of the prey is reasonable for the size of the snake. Juveniles do well with half-grown mice and fuzzies, subadults do best with mice, and adults are fed rats, guinea pigs, or rabbits; with the numbers dependent on the frequency of feeding. How much to feed depends on the situation, please speak with your veterinarian for your individual snake. Usually feeding every 5-7 days is recommended until they are a

More on the back!

year old, then every 2-4 weeks for several years. When they are adults, they are often fed every other month. Snakes should not have loose skin or a triangular appearance head-on (previous signs in a snake indicate need for immediate veterinary consultation). Obesity can become a problem, with skin rolls between the ribs visible. If your snake refuses to eat for 2 or more meals, call us for recommendations on encouraging eating, but don't panic. The following are some suggestions to try at home.

1. Correct husbandry problems
2. Feed freshly-killed prey
3. Offer freshly-killed different colored rodents (remember size them for your animal!)
4. Offer a live pinkie rat or mouse
5. Place the snake with the freshly-killed food into a pillowcase tied shut overnight in the cage (Remove all water containers from the cage!) and leave the room unoccupied
6. Remove the water bowl for 2 days, stop soaks, then place a fresh-killed rodent that is soaked in water in front of the hide box
7. Still having problems, schedule a consultation and an exam with your veterinarian

Health care: Snakes can be very good at hiding illness. We recommend a physical exam, CBC, chemistries, and fecal float every 6 months, and for the new boa. Weighing your pet at home can be a good way to catch illnesses early. Please bring them in to see us if their weight changes by 10%, or more. Common problems are obesity, anorexia, cancer, intestinal obstruction, constipation, stomatitis (mouth rot), incorrect husbandry, upper respiratory problems, pneumonia, and intestinal parasites. Remember with any disease processes, the sooner we see the animal, the more successful we are at treating them!

Sexing: Done by a veterinarian or an experienced herpetologist using a probe, which if done improperly provides an incorrect sexing and can hurt the animal.

