

## Boa Constrictor (*Boa Constrictor*) Care Plan

This species is widespread in Central and South America, with up to ten mainland and island subspecies, ranging from the dark coloured Argentinian Boa (*B. constrictor occidentalis*) to much lighter brown or grey specimens often with red tails. All have saddle markings. They vary in size from the dwarf island races such as the Hog's Island Boa (*B. constrictor imperator*) reaching approx. 1m in length to approx. 4m for the mainland Boas.

These snakes are moderately aboreal and primarily nocturnal or crepuscular (active at dawn and dusk).

### Suitability as Pets

Boas should only be kept by experienced herpetologists. ***Never purchase a wild caught animal.***

### Sexing & Reproduction

They give birth to live young after a gestation period of 4-10 months. Males usually have longer spurs next to the cloaca than females and are often smaller in size. Probing is the most accurate method of sexing them but should only be carried out by experienced herpetologists or veterinary surgeons.

### Housing

Boas require a secure well ventilated large vivarium with the correct temperature gradient and places to hide. Glass vivariums are suitable for juveniles; adults require a wooden cage with a glass front. They are very powerful and good at escaping so the vivarium must be escape-proof and lockable. As a minimum the vivarium should be two thirds of the snake's length long and one third of the snakes's length wide.

Spot clean as necessary to remove faeces and urates and disinfect the cage every 2 months eg with Ark-Klens or Tamodine-E (Vetark).

Juvenile Boas can be kept initially in small plastic containers with a ventilation hole covered by mesh in the lid. Place a third of the container on a heat mat and monitor the temperature gradient as for adults. Use kitchen paper as substrate and provide a hide box or tube and a water bowl.

### Lighting

These snakes are primarily nocturnal or crepuscular (active at dawn and dusk). These snakes are adapted for underground life.

It is not traditional to offer full spectrum UV lights, however these animals do seem to accept such lighting well (even if only to simulate natural photoperiod).

Some simple daylight photoperiod should be provided and this can be simple tungsten bulbs or more complex mixed daylight/UV sources.

## Heating/ Temperature

The vivarium temperature should be 28-32°C during the day, with a night-time drop of a few degrees (no lower than 26-30°C). There should be a temperature gradient from one end of the enclosure to the other enabling the snake to regulate its own temperature by moving around. This can be achieved using heat mats (juveniles only), ceramic heaters or power plates. Heat mats should not cover more than a third of the floor area.

It is essential that any heaters or lights inside the vivarium are guarded to prevent direct contact by the snake. Use a thermostat to control the heat system. Hot rocks are not recommended.

## Furniture (Climbing and shelter)

Cardboard boxes, upside down plastic dog baskets or dustbins can all be used as hides for large snakes. A hide is recommended within the vivarium.

Provide a heavy water dish large enough for immersion at the cooler end of the vivarium. In the wild they are good swimmers and enjoy bathing in warm water especially before a shed.

An object with an abrasive surface such as a piece of bark should be provided to facilitate shedding of the skin. Newspaper is the most practical substrate though bark chips or astroturf can also be used.

## Water /Humidity

Humidity should be 50-80%. It is essential that vivarium temperature (at both ends of the vivarium) and humidity are monitored to ensure that your Boa is living in the correct environmental conditions. If the humidity is too high boas are prone to skin infections. However providing a humidity chamber or misting the snake daily just before it sheds will help it to shed successfully.

## Diet / Feeding

Boa Constrictors feed on a variety of vertebrates including birds, amphibians, mammals and other reptiles but in captivity they can be easily maintained on a diet of rats and rabbits. An adult will need feeding every 2-3 weeks. Do not feed anything wider than the widest part of the snake.

Some snakes may be reluctant to feed, especially if wild caught. This may be due to unsuitable environmental conditions, seasonal changes (males may not eat during the breeding season; females will not eat while gravid), stress (eg due to lack of a hide box), because it is about to shed, or because of medical problems. Try warming the food slightly before feeding. Do not handle your snake for a couple of days after feeding.

Provide fresh water every couple of days.

Juveniles should start feeding after their first shed. Hatchlings are normally good feeders and will take small rodents and the occasional chick every week. By the age of 2-3 years, they will need larger prey items eg rabbits and will only require feeding every 2-3 weeks.

## Food Dusting/ Vitamin Supplementation

No specific supplementation is traditional. The quality of the food offered will have an effect upon the snakes nutrition and therefore adequate nutrition of prey species is important.

## Preventative Care & Disease Management

Quarantine all new snakes for at **least** 6 months in order to reduce the chance of transmitting diseases such as Inclusion Body Disease and Ophidian Paramyxovirus infection (two untreatable and fatal viral diseases to which boids are susceptible).

During this period record normal patterns of eating, defaecating, weight gain and behaviour for each animal. Have a fresh faecal sample tested for internal parasites such as worms or protozoa. If your snake shows any signs of illness such as regurgitation, abnormal body position, decreased appetite or abnormal respiration it should be examined by a vet as soon as possible.

Accidents and injuries can happen, both to the reptile and the reptile handler. Not only can bites happen, but also there are diseases that can be transmitted between animals - and that means between reptiles and humans.

Keepers should be ware of the prevention of reptile associated salmonellosis (RAS).

Good hygiene is essential, not only to your pet's health, but to your own.

Reptiles can be non- symptomatic carriers of Salmonella, bacteria that cause sometimes lethal food poisoning.

Children, the aged, and those who are immune-compromised are particularly susceptible to Salmonella from any source.

There are measures you can take to minimize risk:

- After handling your pet reptile, wash your hands with soap for at least 30 seconds, or use hand disinfectant.
- Disinfect any area you used to clean cages, dishes and do not use this area for food preparation.
- Use separate cleaning utensils, not the sponge you use to wash your own dishes.
- Reptiles are NOT recommended if you're pregnant or have a young child or an immuno-compromised person in your home.
- Don't kiss a reptile pet.