

BALL/ ROYAL PYTHON CARE SHEET

(Python regius)

****For generalized, background information on snake care and husbandry, please see the "General Snake Care Sheet" first****

The ball python a small, heavy bodied species native to western and north-central Africa (Senegal, Guinea Bissau, Guinea, and Liberia eastward to Sudan and northwestern Uganda). Ball pythons derive their name from their tendency to coil into a tight ball with their heads in the center when threatened. Sometimes referred to as the royal python in Europe, this species is a popular choice due to its small size and placid disposition. Captive-born specimens typically lack many of the feeding issues and parasite loads that wild-caught balls are known for. Captive-bred and born Ball pythons are also available in a huge array of color and pattern morphs attained through selective breeding. There are well over one hundred such morphs and variants, with new ones being discovered or produced every year by top breeders across the US.

***Overall Difficulty Level: Novice**

Provided a captive bred and born, well established animal is acquired, ball pythons can make for excellent starter snakes for the beginning reptile enthusiast and reach relatively small adult sizes. A general knowledge and understanding of reptile, and more specifically, snake husbandry is needed before acquiring a ball python. Given the proper care, ball pythons can attain longevity of 20-30 years in captivity, sometimes longer.

Ball python Taxonomy

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Serpentes

Family: Pythonidae

Genus: Python

Species Epithet: *Python regius*

Size and Description

Ball python hatchlings are usually around 10" in length. Adult ball pythons range from about 36 to 60" (or about 3 to 5' in length). A normal ball python is a small, heavy bodied python that is black to dark brown in color with a variable number of large brown to yellowish brown loaf and oval shaped lateral blotches. There are two yellowish stripes bordered in black running from the nostrils to the neck on an otherwise unmarked brownish colored head. Like most pythons, there are heat sensitive labial pits present.

There are perhaps hundreds of different color and pattern morphs and combinations of the Ball python currently in the reptile industry including Albinos, Pastels, Spiders, Pinstripes, Axanotics, Mojaves, Genetic Stripes, Clowns, Cinnamons, Hypos/Ghosts, Womas, Yellowbelly, Enchis,

Calico, Bumble bees, Granites, Pie balds, Paradoxes, Spotnose, Leucistics, Spinners, Lesser Platins, Jungles, Snows, and Bananas to name only a few.

Temperament and Handling

Ball pythons, like many species of snake, are often initially more defensive as hatchlings or juveniles. Normally, ball pythons are docile snakes that coil into a tight ball (hence the name) when startled. However, the occasional hatchling or juvenile may be nippy, and exhibit coiling and striking. With patience and gentle handling, most ball pythons will become more docile and can be worked with more easily. It should be kept in mind however that even a supposedly docile snake may bite or react defensively if suddenly startled or frightened or when food is detected (resulting in a feeding response bite).

Enclosure/Housing

The enclosure you choose must be secure to prevent the escape of the inhabitant and provide adequate ventilation. Hatchling to juvenile ball pythons can be maintained in a 10-15 gallon long glass terrarium with a secure screen top. Larger numbers of hatchling to juvenile ball pythons can be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriately sized plastic shoe box sized containers with holes melted or punched in for ventilation. These containers are made by Iris, Rubbermaid, and Sterilite. Rack systems are usually heated with Flexwatt heat tape either installed along the back wall of the rack as back heat or on the rear half of the floor of each slot as belly heat, and should be monitored with a quality thermostat.

Adult ball pythons can be maintained in a 20-30 gallon long glass terrarium or similar sized commercially available plastic, wooden, melamine, or PVC enclosure with front opening sliding or hinged acrylic or glass doors if one chooses. These types of enclosures provide increased security for snakes within them and space can be better utilized with them since they are stackable, and temperature and humidity can be relatively easy to control within them. Many of these types of enclosures are also available with built in heating and lighting elements as well. Adults can also be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriate sized sweater to blanket box sized containers (28-32 quarts for adult males, and up to 41 quarts or similar size for adult females), as previously described.

A hide-box for allowing the snake to retreat from view is recommended as part of a terrarium setup as well. Besides commercially available hide boxes, you could modify many things to serve as a hide box. They can include opaque plastic storage container, plastic litter pans for cats, and inverted flowerpots for example. A water dish should also be provided within the enclosure and be changed at least once weekly or sooner if fouled. The dish should be heavy enough so that it isn't easily tipped over (plastic or ceramic crock dishes work well). It should also be cleaned and disinfected periodically.

Temperature and Heating

As with all reptiles, ball pythons are ectothermic animals, meaning it is important to provide them with an external heat source and thermal gradient for proper digestion and gestation. There should be a warm side and a cooler side to the enclosure. To create the warm side, you can use

an under tank heater (UTH), Flexwatt heat tape, or a radiant heat panel on one half of the enclosure. Many commercially available plastic and PVC enclosures and racks come with their own heating elements. The warm side remain around 87-90 degrees Fahrenheit. It is also important to disallow any snake to come into direct contact with any heating element, as thermal burns can result, and can sometimes be severe, requiring professional veterinary attention. UV or other overhead lighting is not required for most species of snakes, particularly primarily nocturnal species such as ball pythons.

Substrate

The substrate is the enclosure's bedding. Newspaper, commercially available cage liner material, cypress mulch, or coconut husk fibers are all acceptable substrates for ball pythons. Avoid pine and cedar shavings, as these substrates are toxic to snakes. The substrate should be kept dry and be spot cleaned when needed to reduce the likelihood of bacterial outbreaks. A complete substrate change and replacement should be done periodically as well, with that interval depending on the substrate being used.

Feeding and Diet

As with all pythons and boas, ball pythons are nonvenomous constrictors. In their native range, ball pythons will consume rodents and other small mammals (such as gerbils), and the occasional small ground nesting bird.

Neonate ball pythons can be started off once every five to seven days on hopper mice or rat pinkies. The size of the prey item should be increased accordingly as the snake grows. A general rule of thumb to follow is to offer prey items that are no larger than the widest point of the snake. Adult ball pythons can be offered small to medium adult rats every five to seven days. It is important to not to overfeed your ball python, since obesity and compromised health of the snake can result over time.

Wild caught ball pythons are notorious for being difficult feeders, which is why I suggest purchasing a captive-bred and born (CBB) ball python from a reputable source whenever possible in order to avoid many feeding issues, trials, and tribulations so many people hear about with wild caught ball pythons. For more information on feeding issues, see my page titled "Dealing with Difficult Feeders").

Reproduction and Captive Breeding of Ball Pythons

It should first be stated that there are many finer details involved in ball python breeding that will not be covered in this section. For more information, I recommend Dr. Mark Seward's Ball Python Breeding Book" by Dr. Mark Seward along with Dan and Colette Sutherland. You can also feel free to email me with any questions. As background information, Ball pythons are oviparous, (meaning they lay eggs). Female ball pythons reach sexual maturity at 2 or 3 years. Before you even attempt to breed your ball pythons, both the male and female snakes should be in good health, appropriate age and sexual maturity, and be of adequate weight (a female in

excess of 1200 grams is considered suitable for breeding). For males they should be around 800 grams and one and a half to two years old).

To begin around the start of November, reduce the ambient temperature of the female's enclosure to the low 70's at night. This is a good way to simulate natural photoperiods and there are several light sensing devices that can be used in correlation with a digital thermostat. Whichever male you plan to breed should then be introduced to the female's enclosure, where courtship and copulation (I call it "locking up") usually occurs on the day of introduction. The male has small claw-like remnants of limbs that are used to stimulate the female during the copulation process. It is a good practice to periodically separate the pair (every week or two) in order to offer food as well as some rest from breeding. You do want the pair to stay in relatively good health and weight. Males in particular should be carefully monitored since they expend a lot of energy during breeding.

At around the onset of January of the following year, the female should begin to ovulate. During ovulation, the mid body of the female swells considerably. At this stage, the female is considered gravid and the male can be removed from the female's enclosure. The time between the initial follicular development and ovulation in the female is highly variable. It can be up to 6 months. Typically within a 20 day period, the female will undergo her pre-lay (or post ovulation) shed. After the pre-lay shed, a nest box can be placed into the enclosure. This is a 12 quart plastic shoebox from Rubbermaid filled halfway with vermiculite. Water should be mixed with the vermiculite, but if too much water is added, the eggs will be killed. Around 30 days (around early March or so) the female will typically begin to lay eggs. The size of the clutch is variable depending on the weight and size of the female. Anywhere between 4 and 10 eggs are possible. It is important to NEVER turn the eggs, as this will kill the unborn snake. If it helps you, you can lightly mark the top of each egg with a pencil.

The nest box with eggs is then carefully removed from the enclosure and a lid is placed on the box. Then place the container into the incubator. Incubators can be purchased commercially or be made from a modified cooler or refrigerator depending on the size and number of clutches you have (I won't go into the incubator construction details here). Providing adequate air flow to the eggs is important; this can be done either by opening the lid briefly every few days or by punching a few holes in the container's sides. The eggs should be carefully incubated and monitored with a thermostat set at around 89 degrees F for about 50-60 days before they hatch. After hatching, the neonate ball pythons can then be separated. You can then begin to care for and feed the neonates as mentioned in other parts of this care sheet.

Summary

The Ball python, also sometimes known as the Royal python, has long been perhaps the number one mainstay and "investment" in the herpetocultural hobby and industry, and even perhaps the number one most popularly kept "pet" snake within the pet industry in general for over many years. Even the "normal" ball python has remained amongst the most popular snake species of all to maintain. This is all undoubtedly due to this species' relatively small adult size, mild mannered disposition, its generally basic and straightforward husbandry amongst the many captive bred and born specimens available, and the astounding number of the hundreds of different color and pattern morphs and combinations that continue to be discovered and/or produced by top breeders across the nation and world.