

# **BEAUTY RAT SNAKE CARE SHEET**

**(*Orthriophis taeniurus ssp.*)**

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

Beauty rat snakes (sometimes called stripe tailed rat snakes) are a medium to large sized old world ratsnake species found in Asia including the countries of China, Taiwan, Thailand, Malaysia, Burma, and Vietnam. As with North American ratsnakes, they are active, agile and semi arboreal species that often hunts birds, bird eggs, and rodents. They consist of eight total subspecies, with perhaps only three or four being commonly kept in herpetoculture (described below).

## **\*Overall Difficulty Level: Novice-Intermediate**

The beauty rat snakes have simple, straightforward care requirements that do not differ drastically from many North American rat snakes. This is also a species which tends to be larger, stronger and more active climbers than corn snakes, but still can be easily maintained provided potential keepers possess some previous knowledge and experience in reptile, specifically snake, husbandry maintaining other species of colubrids first. Given the proper care, these beauty rat snakes can attain longevity of 15-25 years in captivity on average.

## **Beauty Ratsnake Taxonomy**

**Kingdom:** Animalia

**Phylum:** Chordata

**Class:** Reptilia

**Order:** Squamata

**Suborder:** Serpentes

**Family:** Colubridae

**Subfamily:** Colubrinae

**Genus:** *Orthriophis*

**Species Epithet:** *Orthriophis taeniurus*

## **Common Beauty Ratsnake Subspecies in Herpetoculture**

**Taiwanese Beauty Ratsnake (*Orthriophis taeniurus friesi*):** As hatchlings, Taiwan beauty rats typically range from 7-12 inches in length. As adults, they typically average between five and seven feet (60-84") although some specimens have been known to reach upwards of eight feet. This is a slender bodied snake with a ground color of grayish, yellowish, to brownish yellow with dark dorsal spots, blotches, and cross bands. The posterior third of the body and tail are black to olive-black with a single wide cream colored to yellow dorsal stripe. The yellowish to olive yellow head is long and narrow, with a dark post ocular stripe behind each eye. Occurs primarily in Taiwan. While the nominate subspecies, the **Chinese Beauty Ratsnake** (*Orthriophis taeniurus taeniurus*) occurs primarily in China.

**Cave Dwelling Ratsnake (*Orthriophis taeniurus ridleyi*):** This unique subspecies occurs primarily within Malaysia and Thailand. This species has a dark bluish black to brownish colored head with a prominent dark stripe running from the snout to the rear jaw on each side of the head. Ground color is typically pale yellow to tannish grading into grayish brown to black towards the rear third of the body and tail. A wide whitish to cream colored longitudinal dorsal

stripe is also typically present, becoming most prominent at the posterior third of the body. It occupies deep caves and caverns within its range where it ambushes and feeds primarily on bats.

**Blue Beauty Ratsnake (*Orthriophis taeniurus ssp.*):** Occurs within Vietnam, Burma, and Thailand. This species has a bluish, grayish blue to greenish ground color with dark dorsal and lateral diamond shaped blotches. As with other species, the posterior third of the body and tail are typically chocolate brown to black with a yellowish, white, or cream colored longitudinal dorsal stripe present. Narrow white or cream colored bands may also occur on the tail's lateral sections. As with other *O. taeniurus* species, a dark stripe runs from the snout to the back of the jaw on both sides of the head, and the labial scales are whitish to yellowish.

### **Temperament and Handling**

Beauty rat snakes, like many species of snake, are often initially more defensive as hatchlings or juveniles. They may rattle their tails, musk and defecate, or attempt to bite in response to what they perceive as a potential threat (you handling them). Individual temperament and response to being handled vary among adult beauty rat snakes however. With regular and gentle handling, many will come to tolerate human handling rather well. Some others however (most often in the case of wild caught or otherwise infrequently handled animals) remain somewhat irascible, nervous, and aggressive as adults. 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 beauty rat snakes can be maintained in a 15-20 gallon long glass terrarium with a secure screen top. Hatchling to juvenile beauty rat snakes can also be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriately sized plastic shoe box to sweater box sized containers with holes punched or melted in for ventilation. These containers are made by Iris, Rubbermaid, and Sterilite. These tubs can then be fitted into wooden, melamine, plastic, or PVC shelving units which are designed and built specifically to accommodate one or more sizes of reptile tubs. Racks 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.

Most adult beauty rat snakes are large and active colubrids requiring at minimum a 40 gallon long (36" X 24") glass terrarium or similar sized commercially available plastic, wooden, melamine, or PVC enclosures with front opening sliding or hinged acrylic or glass doors. The Beauty rat snakes are semi arboreal species that will benefit if a few climbing branches or dowels are added to the enclosure. Larger quarters such as 48" X 24" would not hurt for maintaining these snakes in as well. Most of these types of caging also are available with built in heating and lighting elements as well.

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, beauty rat snakes 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 should remain at around 85-90 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, including these beauty rat snakes. However, overhead UV lighting or fluorescent lighting can improve the cage's aesthetics as well as visibility within.

## Substrate

The substrate is the enclosure's bedding. Newspaper, commercially available cage liner material, cypress mulch, aspen shavings, or Sani Chips are all acceptable substrates to use for all of the beauty rat snakes. 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 other ratsnakes, beauty snakes are nonvenomous constrictors, although they may simply grab and ingest smaller prey items without constriction. In their native ranges, these species will typically consume rodents and other small mammals, small birds, and bird's eggs. The Cave dwelling species (*O. taeniurus ridelyi*) oftentimes ambushes and feeds exclusively upon bats.

In captivity, neonate beauty rat snakes can be started off two to three times weekly on pinkie rats or fuzzy rats. 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 Taiwan beauty rat snakes can be offered adult mice to small adult rats every five to seven days. It is important to not to overfeed snakes however, since obesity and compromised health of the snake can result over time.

## Summary:

The Beauty Ratsnakes, particularly the Taiwanese Beauty (*O. taeniurus friesi*) and Blue Beauty Ratsnake (*Orthriophis taeniurus ssp*), have enjoyed relatively steady levels of "mainstream" popularity and following within the herpetocultural hobby and industry over the years. These large, active, and alert semi arboreal Asian ratsnakes, if handled and interacted with from an early age, can make for excellent and quite traceable display animals or simply as pet snakes that seldom present any major husbandry or feeding issues for those seeking a large, unique and oftentimes enjoyable colubrid to keep and work with.