

BISMARCK RINGED PYTHON CARE SHEET

(*Bothrochilus boa*)

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

The Bismarck ringed python is a unique, monotypic taxa of python found on the islands of the Bismarck Archipelago. They are primarily a nocturnal (or crepuscular) and fossorial ambush predators that feed largely on rodents, other small mammals, lizards, and small birds when given the opportunity.

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

While many hatchlings and juveniles are fairly defensive, nippy, and finicky feeders, captive born and well established Bismarck ringed pythons often become relatively docile and easily handled as adults. Potential owners should have some previous knowledge and experience with keeping and handling boas and pythons prior to obtaining a Bismarck ringed python as well as a general knowledge and understanding of captive snake husbandry. Given the proper care, these pythons can attain longevity of 15-25 years on average in captivity.

Bismarck Ringed Python Taxonomy

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Serpentes

Family: Pythonidae

Genus: *Bothrochilus*

Species Epithet: *Bothrochilus boa*

Size and Description

As hatchlings, Bismarck ringed python are usually around seven to twelve inches or so in length. As adults, Bismarck ringed pythons can attain sizes anywhere from four and half to seven feet (54-84"), with females typically attaining larger sizes than males. Hatchlings and young specimens almost always are vibrantly banded in black and orange, although some may be mostly orange with only small amounts of black spotting and/or blotches. In many cases unfortunately, this orange coloration typically fades into a brown, yellowish, to yellowish brown in the adults. The banding on some adult specimens can become quite dark and obscured, sometimes nearly to the point of becoming a black, or melanistic animal. The relatively small head on both juveniles and adults is almost always solid black, and is pointed and spade shaped.

Temperament and Handling

Hatchlings and juvenile Bismarck ringed pythons are often initially more defensive, and adept to strike in self defense (they will frequently gape and hiss, musk/defecate, and attempt to bite in response to a perceived threat (you handling them). As adults, most Bismarck ringed pythons

can make for docile and traceable animals as adults in many instances if handled correctly and frequently from an early age. 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 Bismarck rings can be maintained in a 20-30 gallon long glass terrarium with a secure screen top. To retain adequate humidity if using a glass terrarium, the screen top can be partially covered with an appropriate sized piece of glass while still enabling adequate ventilation. Larger numbers of hatchling to juveniles can be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriately sized plastic shoe box to sweater box sized tubs (28-32 quarts or similar size for subadults) with holes punched or melted 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.

Caging for housing adult Bismarck ringed pythons can include most of the commercially available plastic, wooden, melamine, or PVC enclosures with front opening sliding or hinged acrylic or glass doors. These types of enclosures provide increased security for snakes within them and space can be better utilized with them as they are stackable. Temperature and humidity is also relatively easy to control in these enclosures, and most are available with built in lighting and heating elements. Typically, 48"X 24" caging will be suitable for most individuals. Adults can also be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriate sized sweater to blanket box sized or larger tubs (41 to 72 quarts depending on the size of the snake) such as those provided by ARS or Freedom Breeder Caging. These rack systems are commonly used to house medium to large boas and pythons.

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, Ringed 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. For hatchlings and juveniles, a warm side of 80-85 degrees F should be provided. Adults seem to be more tolerant of temperature fluctuations, and as such can be kept at

around 85-90 degrees F. This is a species that requires relatively high humidity, which can be created by lining the hide box with sphagnum moss.

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 Ringed pythons. 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, or coconut husk fibers are all acceptable substrates to use for Bismarck ringed pythons. Avoid pine and cedar shavings, as these substrates are toxic to snakes. To create and maintain the high humidity that Bismarck ringed pythons require, line the hide box with a moist (but not wet) substrate such as sphagnum moss. The regular cage 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, Bismarck ringed pythons are nonvenomous constrictors, although they may swallow small prey without constriction. They will consume rodents and other small mammals, birds, and the occasional lizard in the wild of their natural range.

Hatchling Bismarck ringed pythons can be started off once every five to seven days on pinkie or fuzzie mice. The size of the prey item should then 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. As adults, these pythons will need large prey items such as small to large rats depending on the size of the snake. Adults can be fed every five to seven days on these prey items. Despite their strong feeding responses, It is important to not to overfeed your Ringed python, since obesity and compromised health of the snake can result over time.

Summary

The Bismarck Ringed python belongs to a unique, monotypic genus of pythons found in the Bismarck Archipelago. Despite their vibrant black and orange banding that most juveniles exhibit, coloration of many adult Bismarck Rings tends to dull out, with the banding often becoming obscured by brown, or sometimes even black coloration. This is perhaps the reason why popularity of this species has experienced limited popularity overall in the herpetocultural industry. Fortunately, efforts in maintaining and propagating this species tend to focus on producing beautiful, high contrast adult animals characterized by black and yellow, to yellow-orange banding. Hopefully, increased knowledge and recognition of the efforts towards producing high contrast adult animals within the herpetocultural hobby should renew greater interest in working with this often underrated species.