Blood and Short Tailed Python Care Sheet

(Python brongsersmai)

(Python curtus)

(Python breitensteini)

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

The Blood and Short tailed pythons are medium sized, yet extremely stout and heavy bodied species of pythons that inhabit wet swampy environments and other lowland areas that generally occur in Southeastern Asia. Formerly recognized as three subspecies, there are now three distinct species currently recognized (and described below).

***Overall Difficulty Level: Intermediate**

Blood and short tail pythons have, until only recently, held a negative reputation for being nasty, untrustworthy, and difficult snakes to maintain n captivity. I believe however, that this image is based largely on wild caught and imported animals that are typically parasitized. With the takeoff of captive breeding of blood pythons in the reptile industry in recent years, this species has now increased in popularity among reptile keepers and enthusiasts as a more personable and better acclimated species of python than their wild caught counterparts. Blood pythons can be an enjoyable and successfully maintained species to keep provided that potential keepers have some previous experience in working with boas and pythons and the ability to read and understand snake behavior and husbandry. Given the proper care, blood pythons can attain longevity of 20-30 years on average in captivity, sometimes longer.

Blood Python Taxonomy

Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Class: Reptilia
Order: Squamata
Suborder: Serpentes
Family: Pythonidae
Genus: Python
Species Epithets:
Python brongersmai (Sumatran Blood python)
*Python curtus (*Black Blood python)
Python breitensteini (Short tailed python)

Size and Description

Blood python hatchlings are usually around 10 to 15" in length. As adults, they are extremely heavy bodied snakes, attaining lengths of up to five to six feet. As with most pythons, females are typically larger than males. Formerly recognized as subspecies, there are now three recognized species currently known.

Sumatran/Malaysian Blood Python (*P. brongsersmai*): Also widely known as "Red bloods". This blood python is an extremely heavy bodied medium sized python with a ground color of reddish, yellow-orange, to brownish red. There is usually a dorsal row of pale cream colored spots and dashes (or sometimes stripes in some specimens). There are large reddish brown, grayish, or cream colored oscelli and/or loaf shaped blotches along the snake's lateral section. The head is relatively large and broad, and can be yellowish, tan, light brown, or grayish with two distinct dark post ocular stripes. This species occurs in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Sumatra. Occurs in southern Thailand, Malaysia, Sumatra and portions of Indonesia.

Borneo Short tailed Python (*P. breitensteini*): This species occurs within Borneo. Like other blood pythons, it is extremely heavy bodied and characterized by a grayish-tan to light brown ground color with dark brown to reddish brown dorsal saddles and blotches. There are usually yellowish vertebral dashes and stripes as well, usually beginning at midbody. The wide head is usually a pale orange to yellowish orange in color with two dark distinctive post ocular stripes and a narrower dark brown to reddish brown longitudinal stripe dividing the head. Occurs in Indonesia and parts of Malaysia.

Black Blood Python (*P. curtus*): Generally the darkest colored of the species, Black bloods (or Sumatran black bloods) generally have a light to dark gray to tan-gray ground color with darker brown, gray, or black dorsal blotches and saddles. The heads tend to not be as vibrantly colored, and instead range from brown to dark brown with distinct yellow to orange-yellow irises and two distinct dark post ocular stripes. This species occurs in Sumatra and India.

As with most pythons, there are heat sensitive labial pits present. There are now many different designer color and pattern morphs of the blood python that have been and continue to be bred and produced in captivity.

Temperament and Handling

Blood pythons have initially widely been believed to be nasty, untrustworthy, and difficult snakes to keep and maintain in captivity. However, this image is based largely on wild-caught and imported animals before the widespread captive breeding of bloods began. Now, captive bred specimens have become far more readily available in the reptile industry. Although like most snakes, juveniles are initially more defensive (they may gape and hiss, musk/defecate, and attempt to bite), these pythons can make for personable, docile, and trustworthy animals as adults if handled and interacted with regularly. 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 blood pythons can be maintained in a 20 gallon long glass terrarium with a secure screen top. If housing a blood python in a glass terrarium, excess humidity loss through the screen top should be prevented. This can generally be done by partially covering the screen top with an appropriate sized sheet of glass while still allowing for adequate ventilation. Larger numbers of hatchling to juvenile bloods 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.

As adults, blood pythons require adequately sized caging that is a minimum of 48" X 24" to 72" X 24". Commercially available plastic, wooden, melamine, or PVC enclosures with front opening sliding or hinged acrylic or glass doors are perhaps the best enclosures to maintain blood pythons in. These types of enclosures provide increased security for snakes within them and space can be better utilized with them since they are stackable. Temperature and humidity is also relatively easy to maintain in these enclosures, and most are available with built in lighting and heating elements. Adults can also be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriate sized sweater to blanket box sized or larger containers (72 quarts) if they are large enough, as those provided by ARS or Freedom Breeder Caging for instance. These rack systems can be 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. The inside of the hide box can be lined with sphagnum moss as a means of maintaining adequate humidity. 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, blood 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 should remain around 86-88 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 blood 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 blood 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 boas and pythons, blood pythons are non venomous constrictors. They are opportunistic, ambush predators of a variety of rodents and other small to medium sized mammals, ground dwelling birds, and occasionally reptiles such as lizards.

Neonate blood pythons can be started off once every 5-7 days on rat pups. 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. Adult blood pythons can be offered medium to large adult rats every other week, or 14 days and normally possess strong, reliable feeding responses that seldom present any major issues. Despite their strong feeding responses, It is important to not to overfeed your blood python, since obesity and compromised health of the snake can result over time.

Reproduction and Captive Breeding of Blood Pythons

It should first be stated that there are many finer details involved in blood python breeding that will not be covered in this section. There are several other books and more detailed publications available as well, you can also feel free to email me with any questions. As background information, Blood pythons are oviparous, (meaning they lay eggs). Female blood pythons reach sexual maturity at 2 to 4 years. Before you even attempt to breed your blood pythons, both the male and female snakes should be in good health, appropriate age and sexual maturity, and be of adequate weight. Sufficient breeding size is usually around 36-48".

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 can be a plastic shoe or sweater box from Rubbermaid or Sterilite 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 8 and 20+ eggs are possible in blood pythons. 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 (give or take) F for about 50-60 days before they hatch. After hatching, the hatchling blood pythons can then be separated and will begin feeding anywhere from 14-25 days later. You can then begin to care for and feed the neonates as mentioned in other parts of this care sheet.

Summary

Over many years, the mid sized yet extremely heavy set blood and short tail pythons have remained steadily popular in the herpetocultural hobby and industry. In yet even more recent years, bloods have become even more increasingly well established in the industry as an ever increasing number of captive bred and born color and pattern morphs continue to be produced every year. What was once a species that held a widespread, undeserved bad reputation for being aggressive and somewhat unpredictable is now rapidly becoming a favorite and enjoyable species to maintain and propagate by many seeking alert, and personable animals that can often be described as a “large python in a mid sized package”.