

# **BRAZILIAN RAINBOW BOA CARE SHEET**

***(Epicrates cenchria cenchria)***

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

Brazilian rainbow boas are a medium sized species of boa found in South America, including Brazil, Surinam, and into Peru. As their name implies, rainbow boas derive their name from the iridescent sheen that can often be seen on their skin and scales. The Brazilian rainbow boa is perhaps the most colorful species of rainbow boa and as such is likely the most popularly kept of the rainbow boas in the reptile industry. Other species of rainbow boas found elsewhere in South America include the Argentine rainbow boa (*Epicrates c. alvarezi*) and Colombian rainbow boa (*Epicrates c. maurus*).

## **\*Overall Difficulty Level Intermediate**

Brazilian rainbow boas require a bit more precision and monitoring to ensure humidity levels in their enclosure are kept adequate but otherwise do well in captivity if a captive born and well established animal is chosen. Some previous knowledge and experience in boa and python husbandry is a plus before keeping Brazilian rainbows. Given the proper care, BRBs can attain longevity of 20-30 years on average in captivity, sometimes longer.

## **Brazilian Rainbow Boa Taxonomy**

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Serpentes

Family: Boidae

Subfamily: Boinae

Genus: Epicrates

Species Epithet: *Epicrates cenchria*

## **Size and Description**

Brazilian rainbow boa neonates are usually around 15 to 18" in length. As adults, BRBs can attain lengths of four to six feet on average (48-72"). As with most boas, females are typically larger than males. This medium sized boa species, with its iridescent skin and scales, has a red, orangish, to tan ground color with large orangish dorsal blotches bordered in black. There are one to two rows of lateral black and yellowish "bull's-eye" spots and ocelli along each side. There are usually five to six dark lines or streaks radiating from the snout to the back of the head on an otherwise unmarked reddish-orange head. Like most boas and pythons, there are heat sensitive labial pits present.

Several color and pattern morphs of the Brazilian Rainbow boa are currently known including Hypos, Anerythristics, "Eclipse" and "Pearl" phases, and even Calicos

## **Temperament and Handling**

Rainbow Boas, like many species of snake, are often initially more defensive as neonates or juveniles. A frightened or startled rainbow boa may coil into an "S" shaped defensive posture, attempt to bite, and hiss to warn a perceived threat. With patience and consistent handling, many BRBs will become more tolerant of being handled and can be worked with and handled more easily 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. Neonate to juvenile rainbow boas can be maintained in a 20 gallon long glass terrarium with a secure screen top. If housing a rainbow boa in a glass terrarium, steps should be taken to prevent excess humidity loss through the screen top. This can generally be done by partially covering the screen top with an appropriately sized sheet of glass while still allowing for adequate ventilation. Larger numbers of hatchling to adult BRBs can be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriately sized plastic shoe to sweater box sized tubs with holes punched or melted in for ventilation. These containers are made by Iris, Rubbermaid, and Sterilite. 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.

As adults, BRBs require adequately sized caging that is a minimum of 48" X 24". Commercially available plastic, wood, melamine, or PVC enclosures with front opening sliding or hinged glass or acrylic doors are perhaps the best enclosures to maintain rainbow boas in. These types of enclosures provide increased security for snakes within them and space can be better utilized with them since they are stackable. These types of enclosures also enable easier temperature and humidity control, 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) 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. In order to provide the proper level of humidity necessary for rainbow boas, a humidity box (which can also serve as a hide box) should be provided in the enclosure. The humidity box can be a clear or opaque plastic container with a hole cut out on the top or side and lined with a sphagnum moss substrate on the inside. 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, rainbow boas 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 85-88 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, including rainbow boas. 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. Rainbow boas should be kept on substrates that maintain around 70% humidity. Substrates that work well for this include the commercially available coconut husk bedding, sphagnum moss, and cypress mulch. Do not use pine or 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, Brazilian rainbow boas are non venomous constrictors. In the wild, rainbow boas will feed on rodents and other small mammals, birds, and the occasional lizard.

Neonate rainbow boas can be started off once every five to seven days on rat pinkies to rat fuzzies. 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 rainbow boas can be offered medium to large adult rats every other week, or 14 days. Despite their strong feeding responses, It is important to not to overfeed snakes, since obesity and compromised health of the snake can result over time.

### **Summary**

The beautiful and highly iridescent sheen and scalation, combined with its vibrant, contrasting patterning continue to make the Brazilian rainbow boa perhaps the most popular and widely sought after rainbow boa subspecies, and certainly among the boid species as well, in the herpetocultural hobby and industry. This is a species that requires relatively precise attention to humidity and temperatures in order to thrive. However, combining its iridescent beauty with its relatively manageable adult size that is not overly large for many to keep or handle, and its often traceable disposition among widely available captive bred and born animals, Brazilian rainbow boas can often make for a fine display animal or “pet” snake to maintain for the intermediate reptile enthusiast or hobbyist.