

CARPET PYTHON CARE SHEET

(Morelia spilota ssp.)

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

Carpet pythons are a medium sized but slender bodied species of python found throughout the mainland of Australia, as well as Indonesia and Papa New Guinea depending on the particular subspecies. All species of carpet pythons are considered semi-arboreal, and often scale trees in search of birds, small mammals, and other reptiles. As with many other snakes, they are beneficial to humans in that they control rodent populations. It is said that carpet pythons derive their name from their often colorful and highly intricate patterning and coloration, which is said to resemble Oriental and Asian carpets.

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

While often nippy as hatchlings, carpet pythons often become docile, alert, and active snakes as adults with regular handling and normally present few husbandry issues, making them beautiful display snakes. Potential keepers of carpet pythons should be aware of and be comfortable with keeping a relatively slender bodied snake that has the potential to reach six to nine feet in length on average and have a solid general knowledge of snake husbandry and behavior before acquiring a carpet python. Given the proper care, carpet pythons can attain longevity of 20-30 years in captivity, sometimes longer.

Size and Description

Most carpet python hatchlings are usually around 12-14" in length. Adult jungle and Irian Jaya carpet pythons range from about 48 to 72" (or around four to six feet) in length. Some can get larger, and reach sizes of around seven feet (84"). Other subspecies such as the Coastal Carpet python (*Morelia s. mcdowelli*) can attain lengths of 10-12 feet (120-144"), although as a species carpet pythons are relatively slender bodied. The Jungle Carpet python is perhaps the most colorful species, and is a medium sized, fairly slender bodied python with a prehensile tail has a ground color of black, dark brown, to olive brown with an intricate patterning of rings, bands, blotches, and bars resembling that of an Oriental carpet. This patterning can range from tan or cream colored, to yellowish tan, to bright golden-yellow. The head is relatively broad and triangular and there are labial pits present.

Carpet Python Taxonomy

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Serpentes

Family: Pythonidae

Genus: *Morelia*

Species Epithet: *Morelia spilota*

Carpet Python Subspecies

Coastal Carpet Python (*Morelia spilota mcdowelli*): Perhaps the largest subspecies of carpet python, ranging up to 10-12 feet (120-144") and occurring in the Eastern Australian coastal region and New South Wales. Coastal carpets typically have a brown, olive-brown, to yellowish brown ground color with paler yellow, brown, to olive patterning. Many of the more colorful "Designer" carpet python phases including the "Jaguar", "Tiger", and "Tiger Jaguars" are this species.

Jungle Carpet Python (*Morelia spilota cheynei*): A medium sized subspecies, ranging from four to seven feet on average (48-84") occurring in Northwestern Australia in Queensland. Often thought to be the most colorful species, with vibrant tan, golden, to yellow and black coloration, although many may actually be Jungle-Diamond python crosses (See below).

Diamond Python (*Morelia spilota spilota*): A medium to large subspecies occurring in Southeastern Australia, ranging from four to seven feet (48-84"). This beautiful species is yellowish brown, to olive-yellow in color with pale yellow to tan spots forming intricate 'diamond' patterns hence its common name.

Irian Jaya Carpet Python (*Morelia spilota variegata*): A smaller to medium sized subspecies of Carpet python, occurring in Northern Australia and New Guinea and typically ranging up to six feet (72"). Irian Jaya carpet pythons have a beige, light brown, to reddish brown ground color with an intricate patterning or paler yellow, tan, to brown patterning.

Centralian Carpet Python (*Morelia bredli*): Also known as the Bredli's pythons, this beautiful medium sized species (48-72" or four to six feet) inhabits arid regions of central and southern Australia. This species often has a reddish orange, reddish brown, to sometimes even brick red coloration with intricate pale yellow, tan, to brown patterning.

Temperament and Handling

Most carpet pythons, like many species of snake, are often initially nippy and defensive as hatchlings or juveniles. They may musk and defecate, or attempt to bite to what they perceive as a potential threat (you handling them). This however, should not discourage or mislead a prospective carpet python keeper to abandon the thought of obtaining one or into believing that carpets are not or cannot be traceable animals. With patience and gentle handling, many will become quite traceable and inquisitive animals as adults 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 carpet pythons can be maintained in a 15-20 gallon long glass terrarium with a secure screen top. Larger numbers of hatchling to juvenile carpet 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 Carpet pythons are best maintained in any 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 within these enclosures, and most are available with built in lighting and heating elements. Given the fact that carpet pythons are a semi arboreal species, a sturdily mounted, horizontal branch or shelf within the enclosure (some manufacturers offer this) for perching will often be utilized, but is not an absolute necessity. An enclosure that is 48" X 24" is suitable for most females, although males are usually smaller than females and can be housed in 36" by 24" enclosures. Carpets will also benefit from a little extra cage height as well. For breeding purposes, however, adult carpet pythons can also be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriate sized sweater to blanket box sized or larger containers (72 quarts) such as those provided by ARS and Freedom Breeder Caging. These rack systems are able to accommodate 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, carpet 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 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.

Additional lighting other than the room's can improve the enclosure's aesthetics and visibility within, but is not required for most species of snakes. If you want additional lighting, mounting a fluorescent light on the ceiling of the enclosure and setting it on a timer to create a photoperiod is always an option for you.

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 carpet 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, carpet pythons are non venomous constrictors. They are opportunistic feeders in their native range, and will feed on a variety of small to medium sized rodents and other mammals, birds, and occasionally reptiles such as lizards.

Young carpet pythons should be started off weekly on one to two rat pinkies, with the size of the prey item 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. The reason why rats are suggested as feeders is that adult carpet pythons that have been raised initially on mice as hatchlings/juveniles may be difficult to transition over to rats. An adult carpet python accustomed to only taking mice would need to be fed greater quantities of mice, since mice are a smaller prey item than rats, thus making the animal more costly and impractical to maintain. At the same time, It is important to remember not to overfeed any snake, since obesity and compromised health of the snake can result over time.

Reproduction and Captive Breeding of Carpet pythons

It should first be stated that there are many finer details involved in carpet python breeding that will not be covered in this section. If you have any questions about something that's not mentioned here, feel free to email me. As background information, carpet pythons are oviparous, (meaning they lay eggs). Female carpet pythons reach sexual maturity at two to three years. Males reach sexual maturity in one and a half to two years.

Before you even attempt to breed your carpet pythons, both the male and female snakes should be in good health, appropriate age and sexual maturity, and be of adequate weight. 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 allot 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 32 quart plastic sweater box from 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 10 and 28 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 Fahrenheit for about 55-60 days before they hatch. After the eggs hatch, the neonates can be separated. You can then begin caring for and feeding them as mentioned in other parts of this care sheet.

Summary

Carpet pythons have rapidly become a very popular and widely sought after mid-sized python among “mainstream” herpetoculture, particularly in recent years. With many beautiful species and subspecies now available (including Coastals, Jungles, Diamonds, Irian Jayans, and Centralians), combined with their impressive, yet relatively manageable adult sizes and their highly intricate colors and patterning, it is not difficult to see why. Widespread focus and interest in keeping and producing beautiful and high contrast, “trophy” carpet pythons is also now more of a focus than ever in the herpetocultural hobby and industry. Carpet pythons are a species that typically fare quite well in captivity, and typically make for a fine display animal or unique “pet” snake to maintain as an alternative to larger constrictors (such as Burmese, Reticulated, or African Rock pythons) for the novice to intermediate reptile enthusiast. Overall, interest in these pythons should be expected to remain strong, if not increase, in years to come as additional high contrast animals, as well as even greater and more widespread availability of carpet python morphs, continue to become available.