

COMMON BOA CONSTRICTOR CARE SHEET

(*Boa constrictor imperator*)

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

Common boas (also commonly referred to as Colombian or Colombian Red-tailed boas) are a midsized subspecies of the widespread boa constrictor. This particular subspecies can be found throughout Mexico, Central America, and into Northwestern South America (Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru). They can also be found on several islands off of this range. Boa constrictors can be found in a wide variety of habitats and have both terrestrial and arboreal (meaning tree dwelling) habits. However, as they become older and larger, they usually become more terrestrial. Boas (most species anyway), unlike pythons, do not lay eggs but rather give birth to "live young after the eggs develop internally. This is known as being ovoviviparous. Common boas (or BCIs, which is short for *Boa constrictor imperator*) are a popular choice in the herp hobby due to their usually placid dispositions, ease of care, and relatively manageable sizes as adults. Like the ball python, many morphs exist and are being created every year.

Boa constrictor Taxonomy

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Serpentes

Family: Boidae

Subfamily: Boinae

Genus: Boa

Species Epithet: *Boa constrictor*

*Overall Difficulty Level: Novice-Intermediate

If captive born and well established, Boa constrictors can make for suitable animals to keep for the novice-intermediate level reptile owner or enthusiast. Care for most Boas is not difficult, and is rather straightforward, but potential Boa keepers should be aware of and comfortable with keeping and handling a snake that has the potential to reach six to nine feet on average and be familiar with general snake husbandry in order to successfully keep boas. Given the proper care, boa constrictors can attain longevity of 20-30 years in captivity, sometimes up to 40 years.

Size and Description

BCI neonates are usually around 12 to 18 inches in length. Adult boas range from about 72 to 108"(or ' six to nine feet in length depending on the sex of the animal). Males typically attain smaller sizes than females do, although exceptions do exist. As a species, Boa constrictors are highly variable in coloration among the different subspecies, races, and localities. However, the typical "Colombian red tailed boa" that is the most commonly kept and bred in captivity is a medium to large sized snake with black, brown, or reddish brown bow-tie shaped dorsal blotches on a tan, light brown, or grayish ground color. The posterior third of the body and the tail usually

have a series of large reddish to reddish brown dorsal blotches outlined in a yellowish to cream color. The head is fairly distinct and arrow shaped, and has a pale stripe running from the center of the head to the back of the neck. There is also typically a dark post ocular stripe behind each eye. Heat sensitive labial or facial pits are absent on all Boa constrictors.

There are now numerous color and pattern morphs and combinations of many various subspecies and localities of Boa constrictor including several strains of albino (Kahl, T positive and T negative, and Sharp for example), Hypos and Salmon phases, Arebesques, Motleys, Anerythrics, Pastels, "Leopard" phase, Snows, Sunglows, Moonglows, and Jungle phases to name a few.

Enclosure/Housing

The enclosure you choose must be secure to prevent the escape of the inhabitant and provide adequate ventilation. Neonate to juvenile Boa constrictors can be maintained in a 15-20 gallon long glass terrarium with a secure screen top. Larger numbers of hatchling to sub adult boa constrictors can be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriately sized plastic shoe box sized containers 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.

Caging for adult Boa constrictors can include almost 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 since they are stackable. Temperature and humidity are also relatively easy to maintain in these cages, and most are available with built in lighting and heating elements. In general, the minimum caging dimensions that most adult males can be kept in would be 48" X 24". Since adult females are typically larger than males, a minimum caging size of 72" X 24" is required for most females. Adults can also be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriate sized sweater to blanket box sized containers (72 quarts) such as those provided by ARS or Freedom Breeder Caging. These racks 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, Boa constrictors 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. UV or other overhead lighting is not required for most species of snakes, including boa constrictors. 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 for boa constrictors. 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 species of boas and pythons, the common boa is a non venomous constrictor. Boas are opportunistic feeders, and will feed on a variety of prey items in their natural ranges including a variety of rodents and other small to medium sized mammals, birds, and lizards.

Neonate boa constrictors can be started off once every five to seven days on rat pinkies. The size of the prey item should be increased accordingly as the snake grows. Adult boas can be fed less often than neonates. A general rule of thumb to follow is to offer prey items that are no larger than the widest point of the snake. Adults can be offered medium to large sized adult rats every 7 to 14 days (or once every week or two). It is important to not to overfeed your boas however, since obesity and compromised health of the snake can result over time. In general, most captive bred and born, or otherwise well acclimated boas are normally strong and reliable feeders that seldom present any significant issues with regards to feeding.

Temperament and Handling

Boas, like many species of snake, are often initially more defensive as hatchlings or juveniles. A defensive or startled boa may coil into an "S" shaped defensive posture, gape, and hiss to warn a perceived threat. They may also strike as well. With patience and gentle handling, boas will become more docile and can be worked with more easily (especially as they 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).

When handling any snakes, try to avoid grabbing or restraining the snake too tightly, as this may cause injury to the animal and/or force it to react defensively (as mentioned previously). Handle snakes of any age or size gently and avoid sudden rapid movements, particularly in front of or above the snake. Do not handle a snake for one to two days after feeding, or else the animal may regurgitate its meal. It is also important to practice basic hygienic and sanitary measures when keeping reptiles (or any animal) as a precaution against contracting zoonotic diseases such as salmonellosis.

Boa constrictors can become relatively large and powerful snakes as adults depending on the subspecies and/or locality. Therefore it is important to handle large snakes safely and correctly by not placing a snake around your neck or upper torso, or allowing unsupervised contact with young children or others who may not be experienced in handling a large snake. Every incident involving a snake, or other reptile, undoubtedly fuels further legislation against keeping reptiles and negative publicity towards the reptile hobby as a whole.

Reproduction and Captive Breeding of Boa constrictors

It should be first stated that there are many finer details involved in BCI breeding that will not be covered in this section. This section is largely intended to provide an overview of the reproduction and captive breeding of Boa constrictors and is by no means all inclusive in the amount of information contained here. There are several other books and more detailed publications available as well that can be consulted for additional information. You can also feel free to email me with any questions. As background information, All Boa constrictors are ovovivorous, meaning the embryos develop internally within eggs that are retained within the female prior to being born. Female Boa constrictors reach sexual maturity at around two to four years and when they reach a minimum of 72" or more and weight a minimum of 10-12 pounds. Before you even attempt to breed your Boa constrictors, both the male and female snakes should be in good health, appropriate age, sexual maturity, and be of adequate weight. Many keepers and breeders of Boa constrictors choose to breed their boas in trios or larger groups consisting of one male and two to three females while within one enclosure. Other keepers and breeders however, breed their boas in pairs only. It has been reported by some though who choose to breed their boas in larger groups that they have experienced greater success rates as far as live birth rates go. For the sake of this section though, I am going to assume and make references to breeding boas in pairs only.

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") can be expected to occur. Unlike many species of pythons, however, copulation may not occur immediately after the male's introduction to the female's enclosure. In many instances, actual copulation among the pair may not occur for up to several months after introduction. During the copulation process, the male uses small claw-like remnants of limbs that are to stimulate the female during the copulation process. Both males and females possess these spurs, but they are typically larger and more pronounced in males.

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 alot 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. A warm basking spot to facilitate the development and growth of the embryos is very important, and should be maintained closely at around 90-92 degrees F. Oftentimes the female can be seen coiled over this hot spot in an unusual or disorganized manner known as the "heat conservation position" which is a likely indication that embryonic development is well underway. The time between the initial

follicular development and ovulation in the female is highly variable. It can be up to six months. Typically within a 20 day period (sometimes slightly longer), the female will undergo her pre-lay (or post ovulation) shed. After a gestation period of anywhere between four and eight months, the female will then typically begin to give birth to their young inside the enclosure. Prior to giving birth, a female boa may partially invert their bodies sideways while over their basking spot, which is a clear indication of being gravid. The size of the brood can be quite variable depending on the weight and size of the female. Broods of up to 50-60 or more neonate boas are not uncommon with many females. The neonates are always born in a transport mucous like egg sac that they will break out of shortly after they are born before they can be separated.

After birth, the neonate boas can then be separated from the mother and each other and be housed individually within shoe box sized rack systems on newspaper or paper towel substrate and a water dish. The neonate boas can be expected to start 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

The Common, or “Colombian” red tailed boa constrictor has long been a popular mainstay in the herpetocultural hobby and industry (and even pet industry in general), with numerous color and pattern morphs being continually produced by top breeders across the nation and world every year. It is also the most common “red tailed” boa subspecies to appear and be sold in great numbers in many pet stores every year. Colombian boas, as well as most other Boa constrictor subspecies, with their relatively simple and straightforward husbandry requirements for the most part, are an impressive and relatively “larger” snake species that often makes a suitable choice for novice to intermediate enthusiasts seeking such an animal but yet do not want an animal attaining overly large sizes and proportions, such as those of a Burmese, Reticulated, or African Rock python. In even more recent years, there seems to have been even greater focus on keeping and propagating many smaller “locality” and “dwarf” boas as well in herpetoculture (some of which attain only 4 to 5 feet on average), therefore ensuring that the interest in boas and the boa market remains strong for many years to come.