

CORN SNAKE CARE SHEET

(*Panthertophis guttata guttata*)

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

The corn snake, also commonly known as the red rat snake, is a medium sized rat snake species indigenous to the Southeastern United States. They are so named due to their black and white to black and orange checkered ventral (belly) pattern that strongly resembles an ear of Indian corn. As with many other snakes, Corn snakes are beneficial to gardeners, homeowners, and farmers since they feed on rodents that would otherwise cause damage and destruction. Corn snakes are one of the most popular and widely kept pet snakes due to their relatively manageable size, simple care requirements, docility, and wide range of color and pattern morphs now widely available in the reptile industry.

Corn snake Taxonomy

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Serpentes

Family: Colubridae

Subfamily: Colubrinae

Genus: Panthertophis

Species Epithet: *Panthertophis guttata*

***Overall Difficulty Level: Novice**

Corn snakes have simple, straightforward care requirements, making them ideal first choices for the beginning reptile enthusiast provided they possess a general knowledge and understanding of reptile, specifically snake, husbandry. Given the proper care, corn snakes can attain longevity of 15-25 years on average in captivity.

Size and Description

Hatchling corn snakes typically range from 7-12 inches in length. As adults, corn snakes can range between three and five feet (or 36-60"). The corn snake is a medium to large colubrid with a grayish, tan-yellow, to orangish background color with numerous reddish orange to reddish brown colored dorsal and lateral blotches outlined in black. Corn snakes often have distinct arrow shaped patterns on the back of their heads and neck. The ventral (belly) is usually white to orangish with black rectangles, resembling ears of Indian corn.

There are also numerous color and pattern morphs and combinations of the corn snake achieved through selective captive breeding have also been produced, rivaled only by perhaps the ball python in the number of morphs. Morphs include Albinos/Amelanistics, Snows, Axanthics,

Anerythristics, Hypos/Ghosts, Motleys, Sunglows, Lavenders, Charcoals, Sun Kissed, Caramels, Blizzards, Butters, Aztec and Zig Zag phases, Candy Canes, Okeetees, Miami phases, Striped phases, Paradoxes, Pinstripes, Hurricanes, Blood Reds, Pewters, Creamsicles, and Lavas to name only a few.

Temperament and Handling

Corn snakes, like many species of snake, are often initially more defensive as hatchlings or juveniles. They may rattle their tails, musk and defecate, or attempt to bite in response to what they perceive as a potential threat (you handling them). With patience and gentle handling, your corn snake will become more tolerant of handling and can be worked with more easily.

Normally, adult corn snakes are docile snakes that are reluctant to bite and are easily handled. 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 corn snakes can be maintained in a 10-15 gallon long glass terrarium with a secure screen top. Larger numbers of hatchling to juvenile cornsnakes can be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriately sized plastic shoe box sized containers with holes punched or melted for ventilation. These containers are made by Iris, Rubbermaid, and Sterilite. These tubs can then be fitted into wooden, melamine, plastic, or PVC shelving units which are designed and built specifically to accommodate one or more sizes of reptile tubs. 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.

Adult corn snakes can easily be maintained in a 20-30 gallon long glass terrarium or similar sized commercially available plastic, wooden, melamine, or PVC enclosure with front opening sliding or hinged acrylic or glass doors if one chooses. Adult corn snakes can also be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriate sized sweater to blanket box sized containers (28-32 quart, 41 quart, or similar sized), as previously described.

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, corn snakes 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. Some commercially available plastic and PVC enclosures and racks come with their own heating elements. The warm side should remain at around 85-90 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, particularly primarily nocturnal species such as corn snakes. 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, aspen shavings, or Sani Chips are all acceptable substrates for corn snakes. 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

Corn snakes, like other ratsnakes, are nonvenomous constrictors, although they may simply seize and ingest small prey items without the use of constriction. In the wild, corn snakes will feed upon rodents and other small mammals, small birds and bird's eggs, lizards, and occasionally frogs.

Neonate corn snakes can be started off in captivity two to three times weekly on pinkie mice to fuzzy mice. The size of the prey item should 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 corn snakes can be offered adult mice every five to seven days and most are normally reliable eaters. It is important to not to overfeed snakes, since obesity and compromised health of the snake can result over time.

Summary

Since the capture and propagation of the first wild collected amelanistic corn snakes in the 1960's and 1970's, corn snakes (or red rat snakes) have often long been thought of by many to be perhaps THE pioneering snake species to have initiated much of the interest and effort into widespread captive propagation of many color and pattern morphs of this and many other species of reptiles in the herpetocultural hobby and industry. It is easy to see why corn snakes have remained a popular choice among novice and advanced keepers and breeders alike due to their relatively manageable size, wide array of colors and patterns, docility, and relatively simple and straightforward care requirements.