

GREEN TREE PYTHON CARE SHEET

(Morelia viridis)

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

Formerly known as *Chondropython viridis*, the green tree python is a medium sized arboreal species native to the northwestern peninsula of Australia, Indonesia, and into New Guinea. These highly arboreal snakes, with their prehensile tails, closely resemble the Emerald tree boas of South America, which is an example of convergent evolution where two different species adopt similar lifestyles and/or appearances despite being found on separate continents. As with many highly arboreal snakes, their bodies are quite triangular in cross section. Green tree pythons also display tremendous color variation when they are hatchlings. Hatchlings can be a vibrant yellow, red, red-orange, maroon, or red-brown in color and begin to develop their adult green to blue-green coloration at around 2-3 years. Due to their attractive and highly variable coloration even as adults, maintaining GTPs has become a mainstay for many intermediate to advanced python keepers in the herpetocultural hobby.

***Overall Difficulty Level: Intermediate-Advanced**

GTPs are a specialized arboreal species that require more attention and precision in temperature, caging, and humidity to be maintained successfully. GTPs are also in general a species that does not tolerate frequent or prolonged periods of handling that may be expected among many novice reptile keepers and enthusiasts. This species tends to fare much better as a display snake where handling is kept to a minimum. Keeping Green tree pythons requires a solid background knowledge and experience in keeping relatively aggressive/defensive boa and python species. Given the proper care, GTPs can attain longevity of 20-30 years on average, sometimes longer.

Green Tree Python Taxonomy

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Serpentes

Family: Pythonidae

Genus: Morelia

Species Epithet: *Morelia viridis*

Size and Description

As hatchlings, most GTPs range from 7-10" in length. As adults, the majority of GTPs range between four and six feet (or 48-72") in length. Females are typically larger than males. The GTP is a medium sized arboreal python with a loaf shaped body in cross section and a highly prehensile tail. Adult coloration can be quite variable depending on locality. Generally, the adult coloration of these snakes can be green, yellow-green or more rarely bluish-green. There are often white (or sometimes pale bluish) dorsal/vertebral spots, flecks, or sometimes a stripe present. Some specimens have yellow flecks and mottling along their laterals as well. The lower

lateral scales and ventral scales are frequently yellow. The hatchlings are also quite variable in color and can be bright yellow, yellowish green, orange, to red with blackish, purple, and/or white dorsal spots and flecks. The head is fairly distinctive and chunky and may have bluish, white, or yellow flecks. Sometimes the head is unmarked. Labial heat sensitive pits are obvious on the green tree python.

Temperament and Handling

The temperament of GTPs can be highly variable depending on the individual specimen and/or locality that the animal originated from. Animals from some localities are in general more amenable to handling than others. Some GTPs can be docile animals that will tolerate short periods of gentle and deliberate handling. Others tend to be more wary and irascible, and are prone to strike at approaching hands and arms. Generally speaking however, GTPs are not snakes that tolerate frequent or extended periods of handling as would a corn snake or ball python. For the most part, GTPs are largely more of a hand off, display species of snake. Hatchlings in particular should not be sexed or handled until they mature into adults at around 2-3 years, as doing so earlier than this can result in spinal injuries and tail kinking. As always, it should also 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).

If one does decide to handle their GTPs, try to avoid grabbing or restraining the snake from above too tightly, as this may cause injury to the animal and/or force it to react defensively (as mentioned previously). As far as the snake is concerned, overhead is the direction in which most potential predators come from. Rather than approaching the snake from above, approach the animal from below and use one or both hands to scoop the animal up off of its perch. Never yank or otherwise forcefully remove a snake from its perch however, since this could result in injury to the animal and/or prompt it to react more defensively. To make the snake more comfortable while in hand, allow the snake to perch on your hand and/or arm just it would the perches in its enclosure. If one is concerned about the possibility of being bitten, gloves can be worn if you so desire. A widely preferred and more convenient method of handling and/or moving both hatchling and adult GTPs when needed is to simply remove the perch on which the snake is currently resting on and place it in a separate enclosure or container. This causes minimal stress and disturbance to the animal. 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.

Enclosure/Housing

The enclosure you choose must be secure to prevent the escape of the inhabitant and provide adequate ventilation. GTPs are species which require arboreal caging for all of their lives. Hatchling to juvenile GTPs can be best maintained in a plastic 12-16 quart Rubbermaid or Sterilite shoebox of appropriate height with holes punched or melted in for ventilation. Larger numbers of hatchling to juvenile GTPs can be kept in commercially available rack systems

consisting of appropriately sized plastic shoe box sized containers as well. Two or three PVC, plastic, and well-cured polyurethane coated bamboo, or wooden dowels approximately the same girth as the snake should be placed and firmly mounted in the enclosure for perching. Ideally these perches should be easily cleaned and disinfected when needed. Rack systems are usually heated with Flexwatt heat tape (either belly heat or back heat), and should be monitored with a quality thermostat.

As adults, GTPs require adequately sized caging that is a minimum of 24" X 24" X 24". For larger adult females, or if you wish to keep your GTP in larger quarters, caging with the dimensions of 36" X 24" X 24" can be utilized. Commercially available plastic, wooden, melamine, or PVC enclosure with front opening sliding or hinged acrylic or glass doors are perhaps the best enclosures to maintain adult GTPs in. These types of enclosures provide increased security for snakes within them and space can be better utilized with them since they are stackable, and temperature and humidity is relatively easy to control within them. Most of these types of cages are also available with built in lighting and heating elements as well. As with the juveniles, adults are largely arboreal and will require two or three PVC or plastic well-cured polyurethane coated bamboo, or wooden dowels approximately the same girth as the snake. These perches should ideally be firmly installed at slightly different elevations within the cage in order to provide climbing opportunities for the snake, as well as to create an adequate thermal gradient that the snake can choose within the enclosure. A hide-box is not typically utilized by GTPs, which more often perch out in the open

An elevated water dish should also be provided within the enclosure and be changed at least once to twice weekly or sooner if fouled. Water dishes inside a GTP's enclosure can be elevated by simply placing them atop a hide box, plastic container, or nearly any other object that can act as a pedestal. 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, green tree 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 necessary heating gradient for arboreal snakes, a ceramic heat emitter, or a radiant heat panel on one half of the enclosure is perhaps best. Many commercially available plastic and PVC enclosures and racks come with their own heating elements. The warm side of the enclosure should be around 85-92 degrees Fahrenheit with the ambient cage temperature within the mid-70's. 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 GTPs. 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 or cage liner material is perhaps the easiest substrate to use with GTPs. Cypress mulch or Coconut husk substrate can be used as a more naturalistic substrate that retains the humidity that GTPs require. 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, green tree pythons are nonvenomous constrictors. In their native range, they will consume rodents and other small mammals, as well as lizards on occasion. Although Green tree pythons are commonly, and erroneously believed to feed on birds as well, stomach content analysis of over 1,000 specimens in the field have shown that birds simply do not constitute a significant portion of the diet of this species.

As hatchlings, GTPs may initially require some time and patience to begin as established eaters. Starting from hatchlings, GTPs can be fed once every five to seven days on one to two mouse pinkies. 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 GTPs can be offered small to medium adult rats every other week, or 14 days. Despite their strong feeding responses, It is important to not to overfeed your GTPs, since they are often fairly sedentary snakes and therefore have relatively slow metabolisms. Obesity and compromised health of the snake can and often does result over time as a result of over feeding.

Summary

The green tree python, or “chondro” (which is a shortened slang term for its former genus, Chondropython) as it is still frequently referred to in the herpetocultural industry, still remains an extremely beautiful and often sought after arboreal mid-sized python species that has remained fairly popular and with a strong following in recent years. In addition to the wide range of colors hatchlings are seen and are available in, even adult animals can exhibit tremendous variability in color from locality to locality and bloodline, with high yellow and even blue animals being perhaps the most widely sought after. Although Green tree pythons are largely a “hands off” snake in terms of handling, and require relatively more precise levels of humidity and husbandry in order to thrive in captivity. this species can nonetheless make for an extremely captivating and beautiful display animal for the intermediate to advanced reptile enthusiast that has several previous years of experience and knowledge in python husbandry and behavior under their belts.