

WOMA PYTHON CARE SHEET

(Aspidites ramsayi)

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

Womas are a medium sized Australian species of python that belong to the unique python genus *Aspidites*. Along with the larger Black headed python, members of the genus *Aspidites* lack the heat sensitive labial pits that most other python species possess. Instead, these species of pythons hunt largely by using scent and sight to locate prey. Being powerful constrictors, womas and blackhead pythons feed largely on rodents, birds, and other reptiles in the wild, and sometimes use their coils to simply crush their prey against the burrow walls if in confined spaces that do not allow for normal constriction.

*Overall Difficulty Level: Novice

Womas are a hardy species of python that do well in captivity and typically have strong feeding responses. A general knowledge of reptile, specifically snake husbandry, and knowledge of their adult size potential should be held before acquiring a woma. Given the proper care, woma pythons can attain longevity of 20-30 years, sometimes longer in captivity.

Woma Taxonomy

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Serpentes

Family: Pythonidae

Genus: *Aspidites*

Species Epithet: *Aspidites ramsayi*

Size and Description

Woma hatchlings are usually around 12-14" in length. Adult womas 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"). The woma has a background color of cream colored, tan, to tawny tan-brown with numerous vertical lateral bars and stripes running the length of the body from the neck. These stripes and bars usually range from brown, to reddish brown. The head and neck are unpatterned brown, yellow, or orangish, and there is a dark spot or patch covering the supraocular scales (above each eye). Unlike most pythons, there are no labial pits present.

Temperament and Handling

Womas, like many species of snake, are often initially nippy and defensive as hatchlings or juveniles. They may musk and defecate, or attempt to bite in response to what they perceive as a potential threat (you handling them). However, with patience and gentle handling, most womas will become quite traceable, tolerant, 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). Womas and Blackhead pythons usually have quite voracious feeding responses, however, which should not be confused with defensiveness.

Enclosure/Housing

The enclosure you choose must be secure to prevent the escape of the inhabitant and provide adequate ventilation. Hatchling to womas can be maintained in a 15-20 gallon long glass terrarium with a secure screen top. Larger numbers of hatchling to womas 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 Woma pythons can be maintained in any of the commercially available plastic, wooden, melamine, or PVC enclosure 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 them, and most are available with built in lighting and heating elements. 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. They will also benefit from a little extra cage height as well. Adult womas 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, womas 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 87-92 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 womas. 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, womas are non venomous constrictors, although they may seize and consume small prey items without constriction. In their native range, womas are voracious and opportunistic predators of rodents and other small mammals, birds, lizards, and even other snakes.

In captivity, woma pythons should be started off weekly on one to two rat pinkies or hoppers, 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. It is important to not to overfeed your woma python, since obesity and compromised health of the snake can result over time. As stated previously, womas typically possess very strong and reliable feeding responses, which may be mistaken for defensiveness or aggression by many keepers.

Reproduction and Captive Breeding of Woma pythons

It should first be stated that there are many finer details involved in 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, woma pythons, like all pythons, are oviparous, (meaning they lay eggs). Female womas typically 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 them, 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

The genus *Aspidities*, consisting of both the Woma and Black headed pythons, are a unique taxa of pitless Australian pythons that have seen increased levels of popularity among “mainstream” herpetoculture in recent years. The woma python typically fares quite well in captivity, and combined with its bold and attractive coloration, tolerance for handling, and typically strong feeding responses, are rapidly becoming a favorite mid sized python species to maintain and propagate among novice to intermediate reptile enthusiasts.