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*Photo Credit: Reptile Range

Children's, Spotted, Stimson's and Anthill/Stimson's Pythons (*Antaresia* spp.)

Underrated "Dwarf" Species from Australia

The genus *Antaresia* collectively consists of several species and subspecies of small, crepuscular Australian to New Guinean pythons which make up perhaps the smallest species and members of the family Pythonidae worldwide. Approximately five to six species are known, including the children's python (*Antaresia childreni*), spotted python (*Antaresia maculosa*), and anthill/Stimson's Python (*Antaresia stimsoni*). Ground color for most of the species within this genus ranges from olive brown, light to dark brown, tan, or yellowish brown with 1 to 3 rows of darker oval or saddle shaped spots and/or blotches. This genus of small pythons are terrestrial to semi-arboreal, and are decent climbers, often seeking refuge or even waiting in ambush at the mouths of roosts or caves to ambush bats or small birds in mid-flight! Members of this genus of pythons are often overlooked and underrated as pets and within herpetoculture, but can be very enjoyable and unique species to maintain in captivity.

Taxonomy

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum/Sub Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Serpentes

Infraorder: Alethinophidia

Family: Pythonidae

Genus: *Antaresia*

Species: *Antaresia maculosa**, *Antaresia childreni**, *Antaresia stimsonii**, and *Antaresia perthensis**; *Antaresia papuensis**2021

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, these dwarf species of pythons can attain longevity of 15 to 25 years or more. Up to 35 to 40 years is also known.

Distribution and Habitat

The dwarf pythons in the genus *Antaresia* are a unique genus of small, terrestrial to semi-

arboreal pythons indigenous to mainland Australia. While the precise range is largely dependent upon the exact species, subspecies, and locality, these small species of pythons generally occur from northern to northwestern Western Australia, through the northern third of the Northern Territory, and into northeastern Queensland. Other species occur from the northern Cape York Peninsula, south through eastern Queensland, and into northern New South Wales. They also occur within the surrounding islands of Australia as well. Within this range, these small pythons occupy a variety of primarily terrestrial to semi-arboreal environments, depending upon the species, subspecies, and their ranges. However, in general, these species of pythons can occur in a wide variety of dry to semi-dry, arid to semi-arid habitats and environments from semi-deserts, to savannahs, scrublands, sandhills, and grasslands, rocky hillsides, to open, semi-dry forests and woodlands. These pythons are fairly secretive, and especially prefer the above habitats when ample vegetation and rocky outcroppings and crevices, to tree hollows and cavities, termite and other insect mounds are available.

Origin/History

Antaresia spp. Wells & Wellington, 1984; Antaresia childreni (Gray, 1842); Antaresia maculosa (Peters, 1873); Antaresia perthensis Stull, 1932; Antaresia papuensis Esquerré, Donnellan, Pavón-Vázquez, Fenker & Keogh, 2021.

It is not certain when exactly any of the Antaresia species, including the Children's, Anthill, Stimson's, and Spotted Pythons were first imported into the United States, although they have been available for at least the past few decades, possibly since at least the late 1980's throughout the 1990's. Australia would prohibit the exportation of its native wildlife in the mid 1970's, and not all documentation of Antaresia spp. imports into the U.S. are available. One of the earliest records of Antaresia imports into the United States is from 1983, when a shipment of 32 pythons arrived at the San Diego Zoo. These individuals were part of a group of animals confiscated by Australian customs officials and sent to the United States for display and breeding.

However, given how Australia also prohibits trade or possession of most non-native reptile species, Antaresia spp. have also become popular species in Australian herpetoculture as well. While not as large in size, or nearly as diverse an array as the ball python, for instance, the Children's and spotted pythons especially would be bred in an increasing array of color and pattern morphs in herpetoculture by the 20th and 21st centuries.

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Pythons from the genus Antaresia usually range from about 5 to 8 inches as hatchlings, and 2 to 5 feet, or 24 to 54 inches depending on the species.

Housing and Enclosure

Enclosure System: Primarily Terrestrial to Semi-Arboreal. Housing must be sealed, secure, and escape proof. Hatchling Children's, spotted, and Stimson's or anthill pythons can be housed in a 10 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adults should be housed in a minimum of a 20 to 40 gallon long terrarium or enclosure. These pythons are primarily terrestrial, and floor space is more important than height. Provide a substrate that can enable burrowing or hiding such as cage liner material, fine aspen shavings, cypress mulch, or coconut fibers. Do not use pine or cedar shavings, as these substrates are toxic to snakes. Provide additional basking and hiding opportunities using live or artificial foliage, rocks, logs, driftwood, or other hides. Also be sure to include a sturdy water bowl or dish as well.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

Create a thermal gradient (or a warm side) in the cage/enclosure with an appropriate sized UTH (or tank heating pad), ceramic or radiant heat emitter, or incandescent, UVA/UVB, or other heat producing bulb. Ideal temperatures for these dwarf Australian pythons range from 75 to 82 degrees F on the cool side and 86 to 92 degrees F on the warm side. Most species of snakes have fairly simple and undemanding heating and lighting requirements in captivity, and do not require additional UVA/UVB lighting, although providing it can be greatly beneficial for their health, immune system, and overall wellness. Also be sure to spot clean the enclosure for urates, feces, or uneaten food at least once per week. Be sure to periodically replace the substrate, clean, and disinfect the enclosure and its furnishings at minimum every 2 to 3 months. More specific lighting, heating, and humidity product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well. This genus of small pythons should be maintained at relatively moderate relative humidity levels, which may range from about 50 to 70%, which may vary depending somewhat on the species and subspecies, and with additional humid hides or retreats to assist with shedding and overall health.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Carnivorous; In the wild, Antaresia pythons are carnivorous, and will prey upon a wide range of small mammals, birds, amphibians, and other reptiles that they can ambush, locate, and consume. In captivity, these pythons can be given feeder rodents of appropriate size, such as rats or mice. Some hatchlings, juveniles, and adult snakes may prefer frogs or lizards, and require additional scenting of prey items. In most general circumstances, it is recommended to provide humanely pre-killed prey animals acquired from a reputable source, as offering live animals to any snake can carry risk of serious injury or even death to your snake when the prey item bites to defend itself or otherwise gnaws on your animal. A general rule of thumb when selecting feeder prey item sizes for your snake is to provide prey items that are approximately the same width as the snake's widest point. It should also be noted that many snakes may refuse food for longer periods of time over several weeks or months, especially in the fall and winter months or if several other husbandry conditions are not being met. While these things can be alarming, it is oftentimes normal, but their overall health and weight should be monitored during these times to make sure they do not lose weight or otherwise deteriorate. Most snakes typically are fed whole prey items, and do not usually require additional calcium or vitamin D3 supplementation unless otherwise directed. Their feeding frequency will also depend on the age, size, and overall health of your animal. Use care as to not overfeed them, as obesity and other health related issues can become an issue. More specific dietary and supplementary product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

Handling

As with many snakes, hatchling and juvenile Antaresia spp. tend to initially be nervous and defensive. They may musk or defecate, or bite when alarmed. Handle them gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal. Most adult Antaresia spp. will become more tolerant and accustomed to handling as they become older, although some can remain somewhat nippy and unpredictable.

****Also be sure to practice basic cleanliness and hygiene associated with proper husbandry after touching or handling any animals or animal enclosures to prevent the possibility of contracting salmonellosis or any other zoonotic pathogens****

Contact

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