



*Rebecca Wyman/RAW Reptiles



*Photo Credit: Unknown, TripAdvisor

"Boa Constrictors" (*Boa constrictor*/*Boa imperator*) and Other "Boa Constrictor" Species

Mid-Sized and Often Locality Specific

"Boa constrictors", commonly and collectively speaking, are generally medium sized to large, terrestrial to semi-arboreal species of boas widely distributed in Central and South America. They can be quite variable in coloration, appearance, and size depending on any of the twelve or more species, subspecies, and localities within their wide range. Depending on these factors, these snakes are heavy bodied tan, light to dark brown, yellowish, to cream colored snakes with dark brown to reddish brown "bow tie" shaped dorsal and lateral blotches, a dark ocular stripe running behind each of the eyes, and red to reddish orange or brownish blotches towards the tail.

"Boa constrictors" as a species are habitat generalists, and can be found in many different environments from semi-arboreal to terrestrial environments, although adults of most species become larger and heavier bodied. In the pet trade, many specimens are known as "red tailed" boas; however, the majority of these are actually the common boas *Boa imperator* (BCI), and not true "red tails", *Boa constrictor* (BCC). There are many different species and localities of *Boa constrictors* found in Mexico, Central, and South America, some of which remain relatively small as adults of approximately 3 ½ to 5 ½ feet. However, for this care guide, we will be focusing on the mid-sized to large, or "typical" *Boa constrictor* species or localities averaging in the 6 to 9 foot range. Some of the largest boas, including some of the "true" "red-tailed" boas have been documented at lengths of up to 12 to 13 feet, although boas of this size are quite rare, and still, by little means top the largest species of pythons found in the world.

"Boa constrictors" are a staple "large snake" species in the pet trade, and can make for excellent and docile pets with the right level of knowledge, experience, and foresight without reaching overly large and unmanageable sizes that some other species do. Many different color and pattern morphs are also widely available including many different strains of albinos, hypomelanistics, snows, anerytheristics, ghost boas, jungle boas, leopard boas, motleys, sunglows, and many others.

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: Boidae

Subfamily: Boinae

Genus: Boa

Species: *Boa constrictor** and *Boa imperator**. Also see additional previously mentioned species below.

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*



**Common, Central American, or “Colombian” Boa (Boa imperator). Photo Credit: BlueRidgeNow.com.*

Common, Central American, or “Colombian” Boa Constrictor (*Boa imperator*)

The “common” or “Colombian” boa constrictor, *Boa imperator*, is perhaps and by far the most commonly and widely available, “run-of-the-mill” “pet-store” boa, most likely of mixed or unknown origins and/or localities, namely Colombia, although sometimes elsewhere from Mexico or Central America, hence their popular name of “Colombian” boa. These boas are also often referred to by the generic pet trade name of “Red-Tailed” boa, but in the vast majority of cases, BCIs, or “Boa constrictor imperators” are not “true” red-tailed boas, having differences in the color intensities of their tails, differing apexes on the dorsal saddles, and differences in their true ranges and localities. Most of the dwarf boa constrictors also belong to this species, *Boa imperator* as well.



"True" Redtail Boas (Boa constrictor constrictor). Photo Credit: TikisGeckos.

"True" Red-Tailed Boa Constrictors (*Boa constrictor constrictor*)

The "true" red-tailed boas, (or BCCs, *Boa constrictor constrictor*), as their names imply, often tend to have the brightest or "most red" tail blotches, and can also be distinguished, in general, by their oftentimes more sharply patterned or contrasting "apexes" of the dorsal saddles, which can often be said to resemble the "Batman" symbol. "True" redtail boas occur from northern to north-central, and into central South America, and encompass a number of the well known "true" redtail" boa localities within this range including the Guyanas, "true" Colombian, Surinames, Venezualans, Peruvians, and a few others. "True" red-tailed boas can also become one of the largest boa constrictor species, sometimes reaching up to 12 to 13 feet, although these sizes are quite rare. "True" redtail boas also have more precise care, humidity, and other husbandry requirements, and can sometimes be more nervous, flighty, or less predictable pet boas than the BCI, or "Common" or Central American boas, although they can still make for excellent pets for the more somewhat more experienced boa or reptile keeper.

Other Boa "Constrictor" Species; Ranges and Habitats



**Amarali Boa Constrictor (Boa amarali). Photo Credit: Boa-constrictors.com*

Bolivian Silver Backed, or Short-Tailed Boa Constrictor (*Boa amarali*)

More commonly known as the “Amarali” Boa constrictor, the Bolivian Silver Backed, or Short-Tailed Boa Constrictor occurs from southeastern Bolivia to southern and southwestern Brazil. As this species’ name implies, this boa constrictor species ranges from whitish to silvery or cream colored on the ground color with narrow, “bat-like” dark brown or black dorsal saddles or blotches, sometimes known as “widow’s peaks”. True to their alternative common names, the Amarali boa has the shortest tail of the Boa species and subspecies as well. This species is endangered in the wild due to habitat loss and destruction. They are available in the herpetocultural hobby, but far from frequently, and command higher initial prices. Some also believe the Amarali to be a local variant of the True Red-Tailed Boas, Boa constrictor constrictor, although genetic testing has yet to confirm this. Amarali boas can be a moderately to larger sized Boa, reaching about 5 to 7 feet.

Boa sigma

This species of Boa constrictor is native to the western Pacific Coast of Mexico, west of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. It was formerly considered an outdated species, although Daren C. Card et al, 2016, considers this a valid species, and thus at least mention of it is included here. Not commonly seen in captivity, or the hobby. Some sources, however, have reclassified the Tarahumara Mountain boas as *Boa sigma*.



**Pearl Island Boa Constrictor (Boa sabogae). Photo Credit: Tierra de Morelia.*

Pearl Island Boa Constrictor (*Boa sabogae*) *Also in “Dwarf” Boa Constrictor Care Guide.

Pearl Island Boas, as their common names may imply, are a Boa constrictor species indigenous to the Pearl Islands, as well as the nearby islands of Cha Mar, Tobaga, and Taboguila of the Panama coast. A relatively light colored species, Pearl Island boas can vary in color from a light beige or brown, to pinkish or light reddish or yellowish, with hypomelanistic, and some other morphs having been found in the wild as well. This species can further be identified by their muted, or reduced, incomplete dorsal blotches or saddles, oftentimes with brighter orange or reddish coloration. The head is comparatively lighter colored compared to the rest of the body, and a darker stripe, as well as post ocular stripes, are present on the head. Pearl Island boas are quite imperiled in the wild, and it is uncertain as to whether remaining populations exist, due to habitat loss and destruction, as well as outright persecution. However, they breed well in captivity and are somewhat available in the pet industry. This is a comparatively smaller species of Boa constrictor as well, typically reaching about 4 to 6 feet in length.



**Clouded Boa Constrictor (*Boa nebulosa*). Photo Credit: Boa-constrictors.com*

Clouded Boa Constrictor (*Boa nebulosa*)

The Clouded Boa constrictor is a somewhat light to dark colored species of Boa constrictor found on the island of Dominica in the Lesser Antilles. This species has a light to dark grayish to brownish ground coloration, and a gray speckled or mottled belly, or underside. The subtle, muted dorsal patterning and rounded blotches and saddles lends the common name of “Clouded” to this species of Boa constrictor. Clouded boas are also a relatively slender boa constrictor species, and are quite adept at climbing. They are currently listed as a CITES Appendix II species, although they can be relatively common within their range due to lack of habitat destruction. Clouded boas are rare in captivity, and are also difficult to breed as well. Neonates can also be difficult feeders as well, preferring lizards or lizard scented rodents, at least initially. Clouded boas are one of the relatively smaller to medium sized boa species, reaching about 4 to 6 feet in length.



**Machanche/Orton's Boa Constrictor (Boa ortonii). Photo Credit: Boa-constrictors.com*

Machanche/Orton's Boa Constrictor (*Boa ortonii*)

The Machanche, or Orton's Boa Constrictor ranges in the South Tumbes province to the mountainous regions of La Libertad in Peru, to as far east as Cajamarca, where it is an endangered species in the wild within this range. This is a rather dark colored boa, ranging from dark brown to blackish or dark reddish-brown, or charcoal colored with lighter spots along the margins of each of the sides of the dorsal saddles. This species, however, is quite rare in captivity, if not nonexistent in availability. The Machanche, or Orton's Boa is a moderately to large sized boa, reaching between 6 and 9 feet in length.



**Saint Lucia Boa Constrictor (Boa orophias). Photo Credit: Boa-constrictors.com*

Saint Lucia Boa Constrictor (*Boa orophias*)

The Saint Lucia Boa Constrictor is a species of Boa constrictor indigenous to the island of Saint Lucia, in the Lesser Antilles, as their locality name implies. A large species, reaching upwards of 10 feet or more, this species can be identified by their tan to pale medium brown coloration with grayish flanks or sides, and irregular dark brown dorsal blotches or saddles. Saddles on adults can be quite dark, and sometimes nearly black on adults. This species is also Endangered in the wild, and is difficult to breed in captivity, thus greatly limiting its availability. The Saint Lucia Boa is a large species of Boa, reaching up to 10 feet, or sometimes as much as 12 feet in length.



**Argentine Boa Constrictor (Boa occidentalis). Photo Credit: Scattershot Exotics.*

Argentine Boa Constrictor (*Boa occidentalis*); “BCO”

The Argentine Boa constrictor is one of the larger species of Boa constrictor, and, as its name implies, is found Argentina through Paraguay in western South America. This is a dark colored species of boa, ranging from dark brown or chocolate brown, to black in ground color with a distinct and contrasting white or lighter speckling or patterning throughout the body. Captive bred individuals, and some morphs of this species are available, but have become much harder to come by in recent years due to this species now being listed as a CITES appendix I species. In the wild, Argentine Boas are threatened by habitat loss and degradation, primarily. Argentine Boas can become a moderate to large boa species, reaching anywhere from about 6 to as much as 10 feet, with some reaching up to 12 feet.



**Peruvian Long-Tailed Boa Constrictor (Boa longicauda). Photo credit: Richard Hind.*

Peruvian Long-Tailed Boa Constrictor (*Boa longicauda*); “BCL”

The Peruvian Long-tailed Boa occurs in the Tumbes province of Northern Peru, and can be readily identified by their black and white, to black and gold ground coloration, with thick dark brown to black spear shaped ocular striping on the head, and behind the eyes, and thick, dark “arrowhead” patterning on the head and neck. The dorsal saddles are also thick, and bold black or dark brown. *Boa longicauda* can appear quite similar to the Machanche, or Orton’s Boa constrictor (*Boa ortonii*), with some believing this species to be a subspecies of *ortonii*, rather. However, some color and pattern morphs are also available in *longicauda*, and color contrast can vary considerably among individuals of different ages. The tail is also comparatively long, hence its common name, although it may not actually be the longest of the Boa constrictor species. Long tailed Boas are available in the herpetocultural hobby, but are much less commonly available. They are often a calmer boa species as well, but are also becoming increasingly

imperiled in the wild due to habitat loss and destruction. Long tailed boas are a medium sized Boa species, typically reaching about 5 to 6 feet.

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, “Boa constrictors” can attain longevity of 20 to 25 years or more, although up to 35 to 40 years is also not uncommon.

Other Species of Boa Constrictors

In addition to the most commonly seen and kept *Boa imperator* and *Boa constrictor* species in herpetoculture and the pet trade, there are also several other species and/or subspecies of “Boa constrictors” found across Central and South America. These other species can vary considerably in their size, color, pattern, range and distribution, and habitat, but for the most part, have similar care and husbandry requirements as the nominate species. There may be slight differences in temperature, humidity, diet, and/or other husbandry factors at least worth mentioning, however. Some of the other species of “Boa constrictors” for which this care and information sheet can also apply to include the **Amaral’s Boa (*Boa amarali*)**, **Ecquadorian Boa (*Boa melanogaster*)**, **Argentine Boa (*Boa occidentalis*)**, **Hog Island Boa (also *Boa imperator*)**, **Long Tailed Boa (*Boa longicauda*)**, and **Pearl Island Boa (*Boa sabogae*)**.

Distribution and Habitat

“Boa constrictors” are widespread medium sized to large, terrestrial to semi-arboreal species of boas, ranging from northern Mexico, through Central America, including Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama, into South America, including Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, and Guyana depending on the species, subspecies, and locality. Also depending on the subspecies, species, and locality, “Boa constrictors” can range from arid and semi-arid desert and scrubland, to grasslands, savannahs, tropical to sub-tropical forests, woodlands, swamplands, agricultural areas, and near suburban and other human habitations within these ranges.

Origin/History

Boa constrictor Linnaeus, 1758; Boa imperator Daudin, 1803.

Boa constrictors, or simply “boas”, have been long established in the pet trade and in herpetoculture for many decades, as far back as at least the 1950’s and 1960’s. They were popular large snake species in circuses, zoological collections, and other public displays and exhibitions. The majority of pet boas imported were believed to have been exported from Colombia in South America. Between 1977 and 1983, over 113,000 live boas were imported into the United States, and these large numbers of exports certainly placed pressure on wild populations when it came to collecting. Now, however, most captive boas are captive-bred.

At some unknown point in time, the common name of “red-tailed” boa became widely adopted in the pet trade for boas commonly sold in pet stores as somewhat of a marketing term. The vast majority of these snakes, however, are/were not “true” locality red-tailed boas, but rather either “Boa imperator” originally imported from Colombia, of lost or unknown lineage or origin, or of mixed and impure localities.

Now, boas have become even more popular pets due to their number of color and pattern morphs and mutations being bred in captivity, without attaining the overly large sizes of Reticulated or Burmese pythons, and several forms of even smaller dwarf “locality” boas have also become available as pets.

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

“Boa constrictors” range from 12 to 18 inches as neonates. Boas are sexually dimorphic, with males averaging 5 to 8 feet, or 54 to 96 inches, and females averaging 7 to 9 feet, or 84 to 108 inches. Some species, subspecies, and localities can reach larger sizes than others, and may reach up to 12 to 13 feet, or 144 to 156 inches. **Always be sure to consider the potential adult size and long term commitment of keeping and housing a “Boa constrictor” or any other large snake prior to obtaining one as part of being a responsible reptile or other pet owner!**

Housing and Enclosure

Enclosure System: Primarily Terrestrial to Semi-Arboreal. Housing must be sealed, well ventilated, and escape proof. Neonate to juvenile boas can be started out in a 20 gallon long terrarium or similar sized enclosure, but will soon require larger accommodations. If glass enclosures are used at any point, be sure that the enclosure retains sufficient humidity. Many of the commercially made plastic or fiberglass enclosures, or otherwise custom-designed enclosures that can retain heat and humidity well are perhaps the best and most practical enclosures to use to house mid to large sized boas and pythons. Depending on the age and size of the animal, a four to six foot by two foot enclosure or larger is required. Boas can be maintained on a substrate of cage liner material, cypress mulch, sphagnum moss, or sphagnum fir mixtures, but always ensure that the substrate does not become too damp or moist. Do not use pine or cedar shavings, as these substrates are toxic to snakes. Boas will also require a large sturdy water dish or tub that must be cleaned, sanitized, and changed regularly, especially if dirtied. Providing an adequately sized hidebox, artificial foliage, driftwood, rocks, logs, and other cage furnishings can also provide additional hiding and basking opportunities. Boas will climb if given the opportunity, but floor space is more important than height.

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 “Boa constrictors” range from 75 to 82 degrees F on the cool side and 85 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. Boa constrictors should be maintained at relatively moderate to somewhat high relative humidity levels, which may range from about 50 to 70%, which can vary with the species, subspecies, and locality, and with additional humid hides or retreats to assist with shedding and overall health.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Carnivorous; In the wild, “Boa constrictors” are carnivorous, and will prey upon a wide range of small to large mammals, birds, and other reptiles that they can ambush and consume. In captivity, “Boa constrictors” can be given feeder rodents or rabbits of appropriate size, such as rats or mice. Larger feeder or prey items for exceptionally large boas can include prey items such as large rabbits, and even poultry, pigs, and other pre-killed livestock, which can also often be obtained through alternative means through local wholesalers, meat, or agricultural suppliers in

one's area. 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, young and juvenile boas are often initially more nervous and defensive. Young boas may gape and hiss, and attempt to bite what they perceive to be a threat or a predator. Handle your boa gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal. Most boas are docile and will become more tolerant and accustomed to handling as they become older. Larger boas do require some careful handling though; Do not place or allow a larger snake around the neck when handling a "Boa constrictor", and use some level of care and common sense when handling or working around a large boa constrictor, as with any large species of snake. There can also be other temperament differences between different species, subspecies, and localities of boa constrictors as well to note.

****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

Authored by Eric Roscoe. For any additional questions, comments, and/or concerns regarding this animal, group of animals, or this care sheet, please email and contact:

Eric.S.Roscoe@gmail.com

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