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Burmese Python (*Python bivittatus*)

The Great Dane of Large Constrictors

The Burmese python is a large, fairly heavy bodied python with a grayish, tan, to light brown background color with large, irregular darker brown blotches down the back. They have a distinct “arrowhead” shaped marking on the head as well. As with most other python species, Burmese pythons also possess a row of heat sensitive pits along their upper labial, or lip scales to enable them to locate endothermic prey even in complete darkness. As with many large, heavy bodied snakes, they are primarily sedentary ambush predators. These large snakes are typically docile and are often bred in captivity for many different color and pattern morphs (including Albinos, Green phases, Labyrinths, Granites, Hypos, Leucistics/Ivories, and many others). Burmese pythons and other large constrictor species may be a controlled, regulated, or prohibited species in some states. Always check any applicable federal, state, and local laws and ordinances that may pertain to the specific possession of this species. Despite this, Burmese pythons are perhaps generally the most docile large constrictor species, and can make for good pets for the right individual or household willing and able to accommodate this large species.

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: Python

Species: *Python bivittatus**

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, Burmese pythons can attain longevity of 20 to 30 years, or more, although up to 40 years is also not uncommon.

Distribution and Habitat

Burmese pythons are a large species of Old World, terrestrial to semi-aquatic python indigenous to southern and southeastern Asia. More specifically, this species ranges from southeastern Nepal, through India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos, to Cambodia, Vietnam, southern China, and Indonesia. This species is also introduced in, but not native to Florida in the southeastern United States. Within this range, Burmese pythons occupy primarily terrestrial to semi-arboreal and semi-aquatic environments, and can be a widespread species of python over much of their range. Burmese pythons can occur from tropical to sub-tropical rainforests, and other humid, tropical forests and woodlands, to marshes and swamplands, tropical grasslands and savannahs, to rocky, tropical foothills, agricultural and cultivated areas, and suburban areas near human habitations. These species of pythons are most often found in these habitats when they are near wetlands and other water sources, such as rivers and river valleys, streams, lakes, irrigated croplands, and marshes or swamplands.

Origin/History

Python bivittatus (Kuhl, 1820).

The Burmese python has long been a popular large snake species to maintain in zoological, circus, and other public attractions or exhibitions due to their large size and relative docility among large constrictor species. It is estimated that Burmese pythons were imported and kept as pets throughout at least much of the 1950's through 1980's. During the 1980's and 90's, hatchling Burmese pythons were widely sold in pet stores at approximately 18 to 24 inches in length; although initially appealing, they would eat and grow quickly, and were perhaps not the ideal beginner's pet snake species. The first albino, or amelanistic Burmese pythons were discovered during the early 1980's, and were acquired by python breeder Bob Clark in the U.S. during about 1986. Since then, the albino Burmese python has been a long-standing pioneer species and color mutation in herpetoculture.

Unfortunately, the establishment of the Burmese python into southern Florida and the Everglades National Park region has also become widely documented, perhaps even more so than information about its natural history in the wild where the Burmese python is native, and it is estimated that the first Burmese python in south Florida was detected on October 24th, 1979. While Burmese pythons may have been present in small numbers in Florida's Everglades since the 1970's, it is also believed by many that the destruction of much larger-scale commercial snake breeding facilities housing Burmese pythons by Hurricane Andrew, or perhaps other catastrophic weather events in south Florida during 1992, or sometime during the early 1990's greatly proliferated the presence of Burmese pythons in Florida.

In 2012, the Burmese python was listed as an "injurious" species under the Lacey Act, thereby prohibiting their continued importation into the United States. As such, only captive-bred Burmese pythons are now legally available in U.S. herpetoculture. These changes to the Lacey Act status listing of Burmese pythons, and seven other boa and python species, greatly influenced and impacted the overall market and availability of these species in herpetoculture during this time, and since, which has also, at least in part, influenced a shift towards other "large" boid species such as the *Boa constrictor*.

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate (if space and enclosure size are not an issue) to Advanced.

Size

Burmese pythons range from 18 to 24 inches as hatchlings. As adults, they can range in size from 12 to 22 feet on average for adults, or 144 to 264 inches depending on their sex, age, and overall husbandry and growth rates. Males are dimorphic, and are usually slightly smaller than

females. Some dwarf localities are also known to remain at smaller sizes. **Always be sure to consider the potential adult size and long term commitment of keeping and housing a Burmese python 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. Housing must be sealed, well ventilated, and escape proof. Hatchling Burmese pythons 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 six to eight foot by three foot enclosure or larger is required. Burmese pythons 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. Burmese pythons 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. Burmese pythons are primarily terrestrial, and 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 Burmese pythons range from 75 to 80 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. Burmese pythons should be maintained at relatively moderate to somewhat high relative humidity levels, which may range from about 60 to 70%, and with additional humid hides or retreats to assist with shedding and overall health.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Carnivorous; In the wild, Burmese pythons 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, Burmese pythons can be given feeder rodents or rabbits of appropriate size, such as rats or mice. Larger feeder or prey items for exceptionally large pythons 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, hatchling and juvenile Burmese pythons are often initially more nervous and defensive. They may gape and hiss, and attempt to bite what they perceive to be a threat or a predator. Handle them gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal. Most Burmese pythons can become docile and are often considered the “gentle giants” of the snake world, but are still very strong animals that should be handled carefully. Do not place or allow a larger snake around the neck when handling a Burmese python and **please follow safe and common sense handling practices when keeping or working with large constrictors.**

****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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