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Cat-Eyed Snakes:

Old World Genera: (*Madagascarophis* spp.) and (*Telescopus* spp.)

New World Genera: (*Leptodeira* spp.)

“Catlike” Colubrids!

Cat-eyed snakes are a unique group of relatively small to medium sized colubrid snakes, with several different genera and species found throughout the world. In the New World of Mexico, Central and South America, and as far north as the southern tip of Texas in the United States, “cat-eyed” snakes consist of about 17 to 18 species of slender bodied, arboreal to semi-arboreal snakes in the genus *Leptodeira*. Species known as the “cat” or “cat-eyed” snakes also occur on the island of Madagascar, off of the southeastern coast of Africa, where this genus.

Madagascarophis, comprises of about 5 species in this genus. Finally, another Old World genus, *Telescopus*, consist of another, approximately 12 species found from the Balkan peninsula of southeastern Europe, and Pakistan in the Middle East, through to southern and western Africa, as well as an additional two species further north in Eurasia.

All species, and genera of the “cat” snakes, or “cat-eyed” snakes, however, tend to be arboreal to semi-arboreal, nocturnal to crepuscular snakes that are also opisthoglyphous, or rear-fanged, using their enlarged pair of maxillary teeth to overpower and swallow small lizards, frogs, or other smaller vertebrates. These snakes also earn their common name “cat-eyed” snakes due to their elliptical, cat-like pupils, which is another adaptation these snakes have for navigating their low light environments. Cat eyed snakes can be quite variable in their coloration and appearance, depending on the genera and species, ranging from grays, browns, yellows, greens, or oranges, with variable series of darker spots or blotches, and alternating lateral or side blotches. As their name suggests, these snakes also have comparatively large eyes, with vertical, “cat-like” pupils. Some species in the *Telescopus* genus, also known as the “Tiger snakes”, such as *T. beetzii* and *T. semiannulatus* are more vibrantly patterned, ranging from pale yellow, orange, to salmon-pink

with 24 to 48 dark brown or black cross-bars, bands, or stripes along the tail and body (see above photo).

In captivity, the genera and species most frequently imported or available tend to be the Madagascar and Old World species, from the genera *Madagascarophis* and *Telescopus*, respectively. *Madagascarophis colubrinus* and *M. ocellatus*, as well as *Telescopus dhara*, and *T. semiannulatus*, are some of the species most readily available.

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: Colubridae

Subfamily: Colubrinae and Pseudoxyrhophiinae

Genus: *Madagascarophis* and *Telescopus*

Species: *Madagascarophis spp.** and *Telescopus spp.**

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

Captive and wild longevity of the cat-eyed snakes remains unstudied, and is uncertain. However, under the correct and proper care and conditions, these snakes have the potential of attaining longevity of at least 10 to 15 years or more.

Distribution and Habitat

Species known as the “cat” or “cat-eyed” snakes occur on the island of Madagascar, off of the southeastern coast of Africa, where this genus, *Madagascarophis*, comprises of about 5 species in this genus. Finally, another Old World genus, *Telescopus*, consist of another, approximately 12 species found from the Balkan peninsula of southeastern Europe, and Pakistan in the Middle East, through to southern and western Africa, as well as an additional two species further north in Eurasia.

The “cat” or “cat-eyed” snakes can be found in a wide variety of dry, to tropical to semi-tropical habitats, depending the genera and species. Species can be found in dry, arid to semi-arid deserts and scrublands, to savannas, open, dry forests, woodlands, and agricultural and cultivated areas, and areas near human habitation, to more tropical or lowland forests. These terrestrial to semi-arboreal snakes will often seek shelter in, or under bark, rocks, low trees and shrubbery among the forest understory, and other man-made buildings or structures which provide food in the form of small mammals, birds, and reptiles or amphibians, as well as shelter.

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Old World and Malagasy “cat eyed” snakes are relatively small to medium sized snakes, depending on the species and genera. Most members of the *Telescopus* genus can be expected to

attain about 80 to 180 cm., or approximately 2 ½ to 6 feet, depending on the species. Madagascarophis, on the other hand, tend to be comparatively smaller snakes, said to seldom exceed 100 cm., or about 39.37 inches in length. The Central and South American Leptodeira spp. usually range between 17.1 and 24.0 inches in adult lengths.

Housing and Enclosure

Enclosure System: Semi-Arboreal. Housing must be sealed, secure, and escape proof. Depending on the genus and the species, these snakes should do well in anywhere from a 15 to 40 gallon tall enclosure. These snakes are semi-arboreal, and height may be utilized just as much as floor space. Substrate can depend on the species being maintained, and where they are native to, although generally, a substrate that can enable burrowing or hiding such as cypress mulch, or coconut fibers will work well. 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 provide sufficient climbing opportunities in the form of live or artificial foliage, twigs, branches, driftwood, and other décor. Also be sure to include a sturdy water bowl or dish as well.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

Cat-eyed snakes can tolerate a wide variety of temperatures and humidity, depending on the genus and species. 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 snakes should range from 70 to 80 degrees F on the cool side and about 90 to 95 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. Cat-eyed snakes can also be maintained at moderate to somewhat high relative humidity levels from about 50 to 80%, depending somewhat on the exact species, with additional humid hides or retreats to assist with shedding and overall health, as needed.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Carnivorous; In the wild, cat-eyed snakes are carnivorous, and will feed on a variety of frogs and other amphibians, small lizards, other small reptiles, small birds, to small rodents or other small mammals in which they can overpower and consume.

In captivity, cat-eyed snakes have been said to sometimes accept frozen/thawed rodents without issue, although most imports will likely prefer lizards, small birds, and/or frogs. In some cases, scenting a rodent with these other food items may be needed to switch them over to rodents. It may depend on the individual snake and their preferences, from what has been reported. When it comes to feeding rodents, in most circumstances, it is recommended to provide humanely pre-killed rodents acquired from a reputable source, as offering live rodents to any snake can carry risk of serious injury or even death to your snake when the rodent bites to defend itself or otherwise gnaws on your animal. A general rule of thumb when selecting feeder rodent sizes for your snake is to provide prey items that are approximately the same width as the snake's widest point; however it has been reported that these species most prefer prey items not much wider than their heads.

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, or if not yet acclimated to captivity. While this can be alarming to new pet owners, 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

Cat-eyed snakes are rear-fanged, or opisthoglyphous genera of snakes, meaning they possess enlarged, rear maxillary teeth designed for puncturing and overpowering smaller birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. While these snakes are typically not medically significant to humans, and do not have as efficient of a venom delivery system as other groups or families of venomous snakes, at least some species can have either particularly large venom glands, and/or comparable toxicity to other, more medically significant species. For these reasons, it is best to handle these snakes with a hook, and with at least some level of caution, at least until one learns and knows their individual snake and how one's body might potentially react to their venom. The greatest level of caution when working with these species are to avoid feeding related bites. Each snake is an individual, and some cat-eyed snakes can be more docile or less likely to bite defensively than others.

****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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