



\*Photo Credit: ExoticPets.Co.Uk

## Steppe, or Dione's Ratsnake (*Elaphe dione*)

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### **A Hardy, Old World Alternative!**

Also known as the Steppe ratsnake, the Dione's ratsnake is a relatively small to medium sized, old world ratsnake species found from eastern Ukraine, southern and southeastern Russia, Central Asia, Iran, Afghanistan, Mongolia, parts of China, and Korea. This Old World ratsnake species can be a rather variable species in color and patterning, depending on the individual. They may range in ground color from yellowish, tan, to light brown or olive brown, and may have a series of darker blotches, spotting, and/or stripes present. Blotched specimens are the most commonly seen, with either two rows of dorsal blotches, and/or narrower reddish to reddish brown dorsal bow-tie shaped dorsal blotches as well as an arrowhead pattern on the back of their heads and necks (and dark post ocular stripes) similar to the North American corn snakes. As with many of the Asian Old world ratsnake species, the Dione's ratsnake is an arboreal to semi arboreal species, often climbing into shrubs, trees, and barns or other outbuildings to seek shelter and smaller prey. This species is commonly encountered in herpetoculture, and can do quite well under the correct care, as they have simple, straightforward, and basic care requirements.

### **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

**Genus:** *Elaphe*

**Species:** *Elaphe dione*\*

\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

### **Lifespan and Longevity**

If provided correct husbandry, this species can be expected to attain typical colubrid longevity of at least 15 to 25 years or more.

## **Distribution and Habitat**

The Dione's ratsnake is an old world species of arboreal to semi-arboreal ratsnake found from eastern Ukraine, southern and southeastern Russia, Central Asia, Iran, Afghanistan, Mongolia, parts of China, and Korea. Within this range, Dione's ratsnakes occupy primarily arboreal to semi-arboreal environments, and can be found in a variety of habitats, from forest edges and woodlands, to agricultural, cultivated, and residential to suburban areas within this range.

## **Origin/History**

Elaphe dione (Pallas, 1773).

Little is known about the history of Dione's or Steppe ratsnakes, either in the wild or in captivity. They have certainly been available in the herpetoculture hobby for at least several decades.

## **Experience Level Required**

Novice/Beginner.

## **Size**

Dione's ratsnakes are a relatively small to medium sized species, ranging from 6 to 12 inches as hatchlings and juveniles, and typically around 2 ½ to 3 ½ feet as adults, or 24 to 36 inches.

## **Housing and Enclosure**

***Enclosure System: Primarily Terrestrial to Semi-Arboreal.*** Housing must be sealed, secure, and escape proof. Hatchling Dione's ratsnakes can be housed in a 10 to 15 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adult Dione's ratsnakes should be housed in a minimum of a 20 to 40 gallon long terrarium or enclosure. These snakes are semi-arboreal, but floor space is more important than height. Provide a substrate that can enable burrowing or hiding such as 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 ratsnakes range from 75 to 80 degrees F on the cool side and 80 to 88 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. Dione's ratsnakes should be maintained at moderate relative humidity levels from about 50 to 70%, with additional humid hides or retreats to assist with shedding and overall health.

## **Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition**

***Carnivorous;*** In the wild, Dione's ratsnakes are carnivorous, and will prey upon rodents and other small mammals, small birds, bird eggs, and other smaller vertebrates. Hatchlings and juveniles will also occasionally eat smaller frogs, lizards, or other reptiles. In captivity, Dione's ratsnakes can be given feeder rodents of appropriate size, such as rats or mice, although they may require scenting with lizards or frogs initially. 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. 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 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**

As with many snakes, hatchling and juvenile Dione's rat snakes may initially be nervous and defensive. These snakes may rattle their tails, musk or defecate, or bite when alarmed. Handle your Dione's rat snake gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal. Most Dione's rat snakes will become more tolerant and accustomed to handling as they become older. \*\*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:

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