



**Photo Credit: Moontaha Ismail.*

Elephant Trunk Snake *[Acrochordus javanicus]*

An Aquatic Species Like No Other

Also known as the Javan file snake, or wart snake, the elephant trunk snake is a large, very heavily bodied and unusual species of snake belonging to its own scientific family. A strictly aquatic species, the elephant trunk snake is a nocturnal to crepuscular species found in freshwater and brackish (a mixture of freshwater and saltwater) water bodies over southern to southeastern Asia, and very seldom, if ever ventures onto dry land. They can also remain submerged for up to 30 to 40 minutes at a time. During harsh conditions when this species may be forced to occupy dry land, these snakes may aestivate under the mud or debris until conditions improve. Elephant trunk snakes are primarily ambush predators of smaller fish, as well as aquatic reptiles and amphibians, although in captivity, they feed primarily on live or pre-killed fish.

Elephant trunk snakes are a medium to large, very heavy bodied species of snake with very loose skin and scales, giving them a heavy “baggy” appearance. Dorsal ground color ranges from dark brown, olive-brown, to dark reddish-brown, with lighter brown, yellowish, to yellowish-brown lateral sides and ventral surface (or belly) with variable dark spots, streaks, blotches, or broken stripes. Their scalation is small and rough. The head also tends to be very wide and flattened, with the eyes and nostrils situated near the tops of their heads.

This highly unusual species is seldom propagated in captivity, but imports and captive hatched specimens occasionally do become available. This species’ large adult sizes and aquatic tendencies, as well as their tendency to become stressed due to improper pH and water quality, can make them difficult to house by all but the most advanced keepers. However, for the experienced and dedicated enthusiast looking for a highly unusual species, the elephant trunk snake is a worthwhile species to maintain.

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: Acrochordidae

Genus: Acrochordus

Species: *Acrochordus javanicus**

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

Captive longevity information for this species is not in abundance. However, under the correct husbandry and conditions, they can be expected to reach at least 10 to 25 years or more.

Distribution and Habitat

Elephant trunk snakes are a strictly aquatic species, ranging across southeastern Asia, from southern Thailand, peninsular Malaysia, Singapore, Borneo, to the Indonesian islands (including Java and Sumatra). These snakes occupy the freshwater to brackish coastal wetlands including rivers, large streams, estuaries, tidal lagoons, and other freshwater and brackish water environments within this range.

Origin/History

Acrochordus javanicus Hornstedt, 1787.

Almost all of these unusual aquatic snakes are imported from Indonesia, and have been for at least several decades. Captive breeding of *Acrochordus* is rare to non-existent, and many would arrive overstressed, have heavy parasite loads, or fungal infections as a result of poor water quality and temperatures. Gravid females are occasionally imported, with the young being born in captivity, although this is about the extent of captive breeding of these snakes.

Experience Level Required

Advanced.

Size

Elephant trunk snakes can be large snakes that are known to reach maximum sizes of up to 7 ½ to 8 feet, or 90 to 96 inches. This species is sexually dimorphic, with females reaching larger and heavier sizes than males. These snakes are ovoviviparous, although the size of juveniles is not well studied.

Housing and Enclosure

Enclosure System: Primarily Aquatic. Elephant trunk snakes can become large, very heavy bodied and strictly aquatic species of snakes, which can make adequately housing this species a challenge to all but advanced enthusiasts. Nonetheless, these snakes should be housed accordingly in an aquatic setup. They do not require any dry land space, although it can be provided nonetheless. The size of the enclosure provided will depend on the size of the snake, with smaller specimens approximately 20 inches or less being able to be housed in a 15 to 20 gallon long aquarium. Larger specimens will of course require much larger enclosures, up to 150 gallons long or equivalent. Although they are aquatic, a secure, tight fitting glass or Plexiglas lid that allows for adequate ventilation should still be provided to prevent potential escape. Water depth in the aquarium should fill at least three quarters of the aquarium depending on the size of the snake in order to provide proper amounts of space, and with at least 6 inches of air space. Maintaining adequate water quality is another important aspect in maintaining these snakes, and a pH of 5.0 to 6.6 should be maintained using an aquarium buffer or conditioner. Testing kits that can monitor for pH, ammonia, nitrate, nitrite, and other water quality aspects can be purchased locally or commercially. These levels should be maintained at as close to zero as possible, although most healthy specimens can tolerate spikes in these ranges. A suitable water filtration system is also required for these snakes to maintain sanitary conditions and suitable water clarity and quality. For filtration, a submersible water filter with adjustable flow settings, or sump filters with in-tank overflow bulkheads. Using sump filters to conceal the aquarium heaters are often recommended, as they provide better protection from, and reduces the risk of injury and/or escape.

Additional furnishings should also be provided in the enclosure to provide for suitable hiding and

anchoring opportunities for these snakes. In this regard, driftwood, rocks/stones, logs, and/or live or artificial plants can be used, but any furnishings should be securely fastened, anchored, or otherwise of sufficient weight to prevent free floating. Heavy, ceramic pots, cork bark, mopani wood, or other commercially available hides of sufficient weight also work well for this species. Elephant trunk snakes can be maintained on aquarium gravel or sand, but avoid bright or artificially colored, coral, or aragonite based substrates. Conversely, these snakes can also be maintained on a bare substrate for easier cleaning, maintenance, and regular water changes.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

For heating, a submersible water heater may be used to maintain water temperatures between 84 and 86 degrees F. Do not allow water temperatures to drastically rise or fall below this gradient. Additional lighting is not required, although ambient low UVA/UVB lighting, or florescent lighting can also be used and will benefit these snakes with a 10 to 12 hour photoperiod. Additional incandescent lighting and/or under tank heating elements (UTHs) are typically not necessary if a submersible water heater is used. 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. Elephant trunk snakes are strictly aquatic species, and relative humidity is not as applicable for this species.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Carnivorous to Piscivorous; Elephant trunk snakes are carnivorous to piscivorous species, feeding on small fish, but will also occasionally feed on small aquatic reptiles and amphibians, such as frogs and their tadpoles, if they can capture and consume them.

In captivity, elephant trunk snakes are primarily piscivorous, or fish eating, and can be fed a variety of live, feeder fish of appropriate size including bettas, rosy barbs, rosy red minnows, South American cichlids, platies, mollies, swordtails, and feeder goldfish. Despite reports that some of these feeder fish may result in nutritional deficiencies in other snakes such as thiamin deficiencies, increased parasite and/or fungal loads, or copper toxicity, no apparent long term effects have been noticed or reported when these snakes are fed these fish as a staple or primary diet. Feeding frequency depending on the size of the snake and the size of the fish given and their nutritional content and value. Feeder fish can also be left and maintained in the snake's enclosure as well. 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

Elephant trunk snakes are typically a placid specie that very seldom, if ever attempt to bite when handled. However, due to their aquatic habits and physiology, they should be considered more as display animals than those that can be handled frequently. If these snakes are to be handled, which should be done so sparingly, care should be taken to ensure that their heavy musculature and weight is adequately supported when out of the water, to prevent internal and/or external injury, and they do not become desiccated as a result of prolonged handling. Overall, handling these snakes should be minimized to when it may be absolutely necessary, such as moving or transferring them to another enclosure, or periodically examining them for fungal or other health related issues.

****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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