



\*Kyle Wilson

## False Water Cobra (Brazilian Smooth Snake) (*Hydrodynastes gigas*)

### A “Cobra” in Name Only

Also sometimes known as the Brazilian smooth snake, the false water cobra is a large, ophistoglyphous (rear fanged) colubrid snake species. False water cobras are a large, smooth scaled colubrid species with a background color of light brown, olive-brown, to yellowish or yellowish brown with larger, dark brown to black irregular dorsal blotches. There is also a wide, dark ocular stripe or band running alongside the head and onto the neck. When threatened, this species will flatten and triangulate its head and neck into a horizontal hood, although it is not truly a cobra or other elapid species. Although false water cobras (or FWCs) are a rear fanged species, fatalities are not currently known, and serious envenomations are quite uncommon. Despite this, they and some other rear fanged species are 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.

### 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:** Xenodontinae

**Genus:** *Hydrodynastes*

**Species:** *Hydrodynastes gigas*\*

*\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

### Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, false water cobras can attain longevity of 15 to 25 years or more.

### Distribution and Habitat

The Brazilian smooth snake, or false water cobra, is a large, terrestrial to semi-aquatic New World colubrid snake indigenous to South America. More specifically, this species ranges from eastern Bolivia, to coastal French Guinea, Suriname, southern Brazil, and into Paraguay and

northern Argentina. Within this range, false water cobras occupy primarily terrestrial to semi-aquatic environments, including wet, humid, tropical to sub-tropical environments such as tropical rainforests and other humid forests and woodlands, as well as marshlands, margins of rivers and streams, floodplain wetlands, and swamplands, although this species can also occur in dryer environments as well.

### **Origin/History**

*Hydrodynastes gigas* (A.M.C. Duméril, Bibron & A.H.A. Duméril, 1854).

False water cobras were first imported into the pet industry and herpetoculture sometime during the mid-to-late 1990's. They would seemingly become much less prevalent by the mid 2010's, however, due to the popularity of the ball python and other species. They would still be increasingly kept and bred in captivity on a small-scale, including some genetic color morphs. Other than this, little other information about their history is documented or known.

### **Experience Level Required**

Intermediate/Moderate to Advanced.

### **Size**

Neonate false water cobras are large, and can range from 10 to 15 inches. As adults, false water cobras typically average 5 to 7 feet, or 54 to 84 inches, although they can reach larger sizes up to 9 feet, or 108 inches.

### **Housing and Enclosure**

***Enclosure System: Primarily Terrestrial to Semi-Aquatic.*** Housing must be sealed, secure, and escape proof. Neonate and juvenile false water cobras can be housed in a 20 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adult false water cobras should be housed in a minimum of a 55 to 75 gallon, or 4' x 2' (or larger) terrarium or enclosure or larger for these large, active snakes. False water cobras are primarily terrestrial, and 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 false water cobras range from 75 to 82 degrees F on the cool side and 85 to 90 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. False water cobras require moderate to somewhat high levels of relative humidity, which should fall at, or within about 60 to 80%, with additional humid hides or retreats to assist with shedding and overall health.

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

***Carnivorous;*** In the wild, false water cobras are carnivorous, and will feed on a variety of prey items including small fish, smaller reptiles and amphibians, bird and reptile eggs, small birds,

and small mammals. In captivity, hatchling false water cobras may initially prefer feeder fish, but many can be converted to frozen-thawed, pre-killed rodents or even feeder chicks of appropriate size. Some of these initial food items for false water cobras, such as feeder fish may require supplemental need vitamin D3 or calcium supplements. Frozen fish can also be given, but with many piscivorous, or fish eating snakes husbandry issues with thiamine deficiencies can arise if not nutritionally balanced. Food items can gradually be increased as needed. A general rule of thumb to follow when feeding snakes is to provide prey items that are approximately the same width as the widest point of the snake. Most captive bred specimens of false water cobras tend to feed on rodents and/or chicks very readily, and some level of caution should be undertaken to avoid potential issues relating to a feeding related bite from this species. Feeding schedules can vary depending on the overall age, size, and health of your animal, but typically once to twice weekly is recommended. Also do not overfeed snakes, as obesity and other health related issues can become concerns. 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**

False water cobras are active and alert diurnal snakes, most of which that are available being captive bred and born specimens. When threatened, FWCs will spread their horizontally orientated hoods to appear much more intimidating to a potential predator or threat. Although false water cobras (or FWCs) are a rear fanged species that possess a specialized Duvernoy's Gland, fatalities are not currently known, and serious envenomations are quite uncommon, although accounts of local envenomation, swelling, and hypersensitivity have been reported in bites from this species. Although many false water cobras can become quite docile and inquisitive, this is a species that still requires at least some caution in handling, particularly during feeding.

**\*\*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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