



*\*Photo Credit: Mickael Leger Photographie*

## Japanese Rat Snake (*Elaphe climacophora*)

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### **Old World Rodent Controllers**

Sometimes known as the Japanese “Cornsnake”, the Japanese ratsnake is an Old World species of slender bodied, medium sized to somewhat large ratsnake species found throughout much of the Japanese archipelago and some of the surrounding Japanese islands and localities thereof. This forest dwelling species can be identified by its olive-greenish, to yellowish-green, to sometimes bluish-green ground coloration with a series of four fainter, dark broken up longitudinal stripes and/or blotches along their bodies, and noticeably dark ocular banding or stripes over each eye. Some populations also feature prevalently albino, or amelanistic specimens, making this among the few snake species in which albinism may indeed be selected for. As with most other ratsnakes, both new World and Old World, Japanese ratsnakes are strong, arboreal to semi-arboreal climbers, and will often scale trees, cliff and rock faces, barns, and other outbuildings and above ground vegetation in search of refuge and smaller prey. These truly unique Old World species of ratsnakes, while still not quite as widespread as some other species, can still be hardy, extremely personable and enjoyable, and easily maintained species that may provide up yet another unique alternative for those seeking a medium sized to large colubrid that is just a little different and less common for the more intermediate level pet owner or enthusiast!

### **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 climacophora*

*\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

### **Lifespan and Longevity**

If provided the proper care, Japanese ratsnakes have the potential to attain longevity of at least

15 to 25 years or more.

### **Distribution and Habitat**

Japanese ratsnakes are an arboreal to semi-arboreal species, often being able to readily climb trees, shrubs, and other above ground vegetation, as well as walls and rock faces, barns, and other outbuildings or houses located within or near forested and woodland habitats, as well as oftentimes agricultural, suburban, or residential areas near human establishments that provide food and shelter for these species of snakes and their smaller prey species. This species is indigenous to much of the Japanese archipelago, and its surrounding islands and localities thereof.

### **Origin/History**

*Elaphe climacophora* (Boie, 1826).

Unfortunately, not much specific information is available on the history of Japanese ratsnakes in herpetoculture, although they have probably been kept, bred, and imported for at least the past several decades.

### **Experience Level Required**

Intermediate/Moderate.

### **Size**

Japanese ratsnakes can range from about 5 to 12 inches as hatchlings, and approximately 3 to 6 feet on average as adults, or 36 to 72 inches.

### **Housing and Enclosure**

***Enclosure System: Terrestrial to Semi-Arboreal.*** Housing must be sealed, secure, and escape proof. Hatchling Japanese ratsnakes can be housed in a 10 to 20 gallon long or tall terrarium or enclosure. Adult Japanese ratsnakes should be housed in a minimum of a 40 to 55 gallon tall or long terrarium or enclosure. Japanese ratsnakes are semi-arboreal, and height can be just as important as floor space for this species. Provide a substrate that can enable burrowing or hiding and that retains humidity well such as aspen, cypress mulch, orchid bark, 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, branches, driftwood, perches, or other hides. Also be sure to include a sturdy water bowl or dish as well. Additional humid hides can be provided as well for additional humidity.

### **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 Japanese 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. These ratsnakes should be maintained at relatively moderate relative humidity levels, from about 40 to 60%, with additional humid hides or retreats to assist with shedding and overall health.

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

***Carnivorous;*** In the wild, Japanese 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, these ratsnakes can be given feeder rodents of appropriate size, such as rats or mice. 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 rat snakes of most species may initially be nervous and defensive. They may rattle their tails, musk or defecate, or bite when alarmed. Handle them gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal. Japanese ratsnakes are an active, alert, and somewhat nervous and flighty species, although they can become more tolerant and accustomed to handling as they become older and more acclimated. This species may gape and attempt to bite, release a foul smelling musk, and/or rapidly vibrate their tails when alarmed or defensive. This is a species that is perhaps best suited for the intermediate level enthusiast, and requires some level of previous knowledge and understanding of snake behavior and husbandry. \*\*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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