



*Photo Credit: David Letosnik

Leopard Ratsnake (*Elaphe/Zamenis situla*)

Attractive, Old World Leopard Prints

The leopard ratsnake is a relatively small to medium sized, old world ratsnake species found in southwestern and southern Europe. Also occasionally known as the European ratsnake, the leopard ratsnake can be a rather variable species in color and patterning, depending on the individual. Ground color typically ranges from a tan to cream color with a dorsal row of larger, darker reddish to reddish-brown blotches bordered in black alternating with smaller, darker lateral blotches. Striped specimens are also occasionally seen. Dark ocular and post ocular bands are also present on the head. As with many of the Asian Old world ratsnake species, the leopard 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 uncommonly encountered in herpetoculture, but can do quite well under the correct care.

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/Zamenis*

Species: *Elaphe/Zamenis situla**

*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 leopard ratsnake is an old world species of ratsnake found across southwestern and southern Europe, including Albania, Bulgaria, Crete, Greece, Italy, Malta, Turkey, Ukraine, and Yugoslavia. Leopard ratsnakes are an arboreal to semi-arboreal species, which can be found in a

variety of habitats, from forest edges and woodlands, to agricultural, cultivated, and residential areas and gardens within this range.

Origin/History

Zamenis situla (Linnaeus, 1758),

Unfortunately, information as to the history of leopard ratsnakes in herpetoculture is lacking. Because of their superficial similarities to the North American corn snake, not the least being that of color and pattern, this species of ratsnake was often referred to by American hobbyists as the European Corn Snake.

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Leopard ratsnakes are a 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 to juvenile leopard ratsnakes can be housed in a 10 to 15 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adult leopard ratsnakes should be housed in a minimum of a 20 to 40 gallon long terrarium or enclosure. Leopard ratsnakes are semi-arboreal, and floor space is just as important as 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, climbing, and hiding opportunities using live or artificial foliage, rocks, logs, branches, perches, 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 leopard 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. Leopard ratsnakes require moderate levels of relative humidity, which should be maintained at, or within 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, leopard 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, leopard ratsnakes can be given feeder rodents of appropriate size, such as rats or mice, although they may initially require scenting. 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 leopard rat snakes may initially be nervous and defensive. These snakes may rattle their tails, musk or defecate, or bite when alarmed. Handle your leopard rat snake gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal. Most leopard rat snakes will become more handleable as they become older, but can still remain a somewhat unpredictable species, occasionally still nipping and/or musking without warning.

****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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