



*Photo Credit: Avril Kennedy

Puffing Snakes (*Pseustes spp.*) [*Spilotes spp.*] and [*Phrynonax spp.*]

Multi-Colored Bird Snakes

Also known as the Bird snakes, Puff snakes, or puffing snakes, these snakes are large, arboreal to semi-arboreal colubrid snakes currently consisting of approximately 9 species found over much of Central and South America. Puffing snakes are large, active, diurnal snakes which can often be seen basking in and near agricultural and human habitations, as well as near rivers and other wetlands. *Pseustes* are large, arboreal to semi-arboreal colubrids that can be quite variable in coloration, pattern, and appearance. Dorsal coloration can consist of faint banding, speckling, to uniform coloration with reds, pinks, oranges, yellows, greens or olives, blues, blacks, to browns and tans. The ventral surfaces are usually lighter yellowish, cream colored, to orangish. Perhaps the most commonly kept and encountered species in the pet trade are the Yellow bellied, or Giant Puffing snake (*P. sulphereus*) and the Puffing snake (*P. poecilonotus*). Puffing snakes earn their common names from their defensive behaviors when threatened or disturbed, which can consist of hissing, coiling into a classic characteristic “S” position, tail vibrating, and greatly expanding their throats and necks. Although most wild caught or imported *Pseustes* tend to be irascible and short tempered, many captive bred and born specimens are becoming available, and more acclimated to captivity. This makes members of this genus of colubrids quite colorful, unique, and uncommon additions for any intermediate to advanced hobbyist 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: *Pseustes*/*Phrynonax*/*Spilotes*

Species: *Pseustes*/*Phrynonax*/*Spilotes spp.**

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, puffing snakes can attain longevity of 15 to 25 years or more in

captivity.

Distribution and Habitat

Puffing snakes are arboreal to semi-arboreal species of colubrid snakes which can be widely distributed in a variety of habitats in Central and South America from Mexico, through Central America, to the northern and central areas of South America to Trinidad and Tobago. Within this range, these large colubrids can be found in arboreal to semi-arboreal habitats, and may occur in dense to open tropical to sub-tropical forests and woodlands, agricultural and residential areas, and along rivers, swamplands, and other wetlands within this range.

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Puffing snakes can be large species, ranging from 8 to 12 inches as hatchlings, and typically 5 to 6 feet as adults, or 54 to 72 inches, although this species can reach up to 9 feet, or 108 inches.

Housing and Enclosure

Enclosure System: Primarily Arboreal. Housing must be sealed and escape proof. Hatchling puffing snakes can be housed in a 15 to 20 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adult snakes should be housed in a minimum of a 40 to 55 gallon tall or similarly sized enclosure. Puffing snakes will enjoy burrowing, and should be provided with a sufficiently deep substrate of at least two to three inches of orchid bark, pesticide and chemical free potting soil, ground coconut fibers, cypress mulch, sphagnum moss, or peat moss. Do not use pine or cedar shavings, as these substrates are toxic to snakes. Provide a large water bowl or dish and a hide box at all times in the enclosure to ensure humidity remains at adequate levels. Artificial foliage, driftwood, and other cage furnishings can provide additional climbing, basking, and hiding opportunities. Puffing snakes can be quite arboreal, and benefit from ample perches and climbing opportunities such as shelves, branches, or mounted dowels. Attractive and naturalistic furnishings, including but not limited to Liana, manzanita, and cork bark are suggested for use with these species. Providing arboreal hides such as cork rounds for puffing snakes is also strongly suggested, and should be placed at multiple levels and gradients within the enclosure to provide greatest thermoregulatory options. Live plants, such as ficus and pothos can also be used for additional furnishings. Regular weekly misting is also recommended, since many arboreal snakes will also drink from, and obtain their hydration through the moisture and condensation collected on their scales and body.

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 puffing snakes range from 75 to 82 degrees F on the cool side and 85 to 92 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. Puffing snakes should be maintained at moderate to somewhat high relative humidity levels from about at least 60 to 80%, depending on the exact species and subspecies, with additional humid hides or retreats to assist

with shedding and overall health.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Carnivorous; In the wild, puffing snakes 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, puffing snakes 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

Puffing snakes are a large, attractive, and active species of new world colubrid that can be very enjoyable to maintain. This species' temperament and disposition will often vary from individual to individual. Some specimens are rather shy, preferring to flee or retreat, while others are known to be more defensive, and will assume a traditional "S" shaped, coil, as well as gape and hiss in preparation to strike while rapidly rattling their tails. Most wild caught and imported specimens can be defensive and easily provoked into striking or assuming defensive postures. However, many captive bred and born puffing snakes can respond well to gentle, deliberate handling. This large species can be a handful to handle, but can make for an excellent, and more unique pet or display snake species to maintain for the more experienced reptile keeper.

****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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Disclaimer: Note that the information provided in these, or any care sheets, are not intended to be all-exhaustive, and further research and care should always be sought and provided when it comes to any species one may prospectively be interested in. These care sheets are also not intended to serve as substitutes for professional veterinary medical care and husbandry should any animal require it. Always seek proper and professional veterinary care for any animal should the need arise, and be prepared ahead of time for any and all husbandry costs and expenses that may occur with any animal beyond the initial purchase. Any animal owned is ultimately a matter of personal/individual care and responsibility. We cannot make any claims or guarantees regarding any information in this care sheet therein. This care sheet may be reprinted or redistributed only in its entirety.

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