



**Photo Credit: Paulo Sérgio Bernarde*

Tiger Ratsnake (*Spilotes pullatus*)

Tigers of the Trees

Also known by many local, or vernacular names, including but certainly not limited to the “Thunder and Lightning” snake, Caninana, Tropical Chicken snake, “Yellow” Rat snake, and likely many others, the tiger ratsnake is a large, boldly colored and patterned, and impressive species of colubrid snake indigenous to Latin America, from southern Mexico, throughout much of northern South America, and into Argentina, as well as Trinidad and Tobago. A highly adaptable and widely ranging species, which is a very strong and agile climber, this impressive species of snake is just at home on the ground as they are above ground in trees and the lower canopy levels. Tiger ratsnakes readily utilize and call residential and agricultural areas home oftentimes due to the presence of not only chickens and their eggs, but also rodents, other small birds, reptiles, and just about any other small vertebrates that these active, agile, and powerful constrictors will readily catch and consume. Five subspecies are currently recognized, and this species stands out and can easily be identified by their quite slender and laterally compressed bodies, distinct heads, and moderate to large eyes used for visually detecting potential food.

Tiger ratsnakes are among the longest colubrid snakes in the New World, or the Americas, and can be quite variable in their ground color and patterning, from blackish to bluish-black with a series of numerous irregular yellow, orangish, to cream colored, alternating dorsal and lateral blotches, speckling, and/or cross-banding, and the head and labial scales are also often heavily cross-barred as well. With their large sizes, coloration, and overall appearances, it can be easily seen why these bold and magnificent new world snakes have captured the interest of many, and while this is most certainly a species which requires a considerable amount of space, experience, and upkeep, for those who are knowledgeable and prepared enough, the tiger ratsnake could be your next coveted prize snake 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: Colubridae

Subfamily: Colubrinae

Genus: *Spilotes*

Species: *Spilotes pullatus*

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, tiger ratsnakes have the potential to attain longevity of at least 15 to 25 years or more.

Distribution and Habitat

Tiger ratsnakes have a wide range and distribution over much of Central and northern South America, from southern Mexico, throughout much of Central America through Panama, and into much of northern South America, including Trinidad, Tobago, and into northern Argentina. This species may potentially occur further in South America within the Amazonian basin as well.

Within this range, tiger ratsnakes are a widely adaptable species, often being found within and around human habitations including a variety of dry to tropical forests, woodlands, and residential areas, to areas of agricultural and plantations. This species especially favors these habitats near water bodies or other wetlands, where they are strongly arboreal to semi-arboreal, often scaling and seeking out food and refuge in trees and other above ground vegetation, buildings, and similar structures.

Origin/History

Spilotes pullatus (Linnaeus, 1758).

Tiger ratsnakes have been available in the herpetocultural pet trade since at least the 1980's.

Most are reported to be wild-collected imports, and captive breeding would be seldom.

Hatchlings have also been reported to sometimes be difficult to feed or rear, and would be prone to overstress.

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate to Advanced.

Size

As hatchlings, tiger ratsnakes may range from approximately 10 to 18 inches, and as adults, can reach large sizes for New World colubrid snakes of up to 6 to 8 feet in length, or 72 to 96 inches. Larger specimens reaching up to as much as 14 feet have been documented in some cases as well, or about 168 inches.

Housing and Enclosure

Enclosure System: Semi-Arboreal. Housing must be sealed, secure, and escape proof. Hatchling tiger ratsnakes can be housed in a 20 to 30 gallon long or tall terrarium or enclosure. Adult tiger ratsnakes require lots of space and large enclosures, and should be housed in a minimum of a 6 foot by 3 foot by 3 foot or similar sized enclosure. Tiger ratsnakes are strongly 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 cypress mulch, orchid bark, or coconut fibers. Do not use pine or cedar shavings, as these substrates are toxic to snakes. Plenty of additional basking, climbing, and hiding opportunities should also be provided for this species 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 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 tiger ratsnakes range from 75 to 85 degrees F on the cool side and about 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. Tiger rat snakes should be maintained at relatively moderate to high relative humidity levels, from about 60 to 70%, with additional humid hides or retreats to assist with shedding and overall health.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Carnivorous; In the wild, tiger ratsnakes are carnivorous, and will prey upon rodents and other small mammals, small birds, bird eggs, and nearly any other smaller vertebrates they can capture and consume. Hatchlings and juveniles will also occasionally eat smaller frogs, lizards, or other reptiles. In captivity, tiger ratsnakes can be given feeder rodents of appropriate size, such as rats or mice, as well as a variety of other prey items such as chicks, gerbils, or other designated feeder species. Tiger ratsnakes are typically voracious eaters, and seldom present many feeding related problems. 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 tiger rat snakes may initially be nervous and defensive. They may rattle their tails, musk or defecate, or bite when alarmed. While many can calm down and become more traceable as adults, the tiger ratsnake is a large, active, alert, and agile species, and wild collected, or otherwise un-acclimated animals especially may be more likely to react defensively in response to attempts to be handled. This is a species which requires some level of care and caution while handling, and are a species which are perhaps best handled and interacted by those with previous experience.

****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:

Eric.S.Roscoe@gmail.com

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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