

How to Care For Your Ball Python

NATURAL HISTORY

Ball pythons (*Python regius*) are found at the edges of the forest lands of Central and Western Africa. They are equally comfortable on the ground and in trees. They are crepuscular, active around dawn and dusk. Called Royal pythons in Europe, we in the United States call them "Balls" due to their habit of curling themselves up into a tight ball when they are nervous, heads pulled firmly into the center. Like most pythons, Balls are curious and gentle snakes.

Balls typically reach 4 feet in length; occasionally there are specimens that reach 5 feet. When properly fed, their bodies become nicely rounded. Like all pythons and boas, Balls have anal spurs. These single claws appearing on either side of the vent are the vestigial remains of the hind legs snakes lost during their evolution from lizard to snake millions of years ago. Males have longer spurs than do the females; males also have smaller heads than the females.

Ball pythons, like all pythons and boas, devour a variety of prey in the wild - amphibians, lizards, other snakes, birds and small mammals. Imported wild-caught Balls tend to be very picky eaters and often will not eat mice, at least initially. Balls are reputed to be able to go for extended periods of time without food; wild-caught Balls have gone for a year or more without food until finally enticed to eat lizards and other snakes. This is not a healthy trait and must not be a reason for selecting this species. Buying captive-born Balls reduces the stress on the threatened populations in the wild and helps ensure you will get a healthy, established eater. With the increased popularity of reptiles as pets there is increased pressure on wild populations. In addition to the more than 20,000 Balls that are imported annually, Balls are killed for food and their skin is used for leather in their native land. Despite their low reproduction rate they are the least expensive pythons on the market. Imported Balls also harbor several different types of parasites which may go unnoticed by the novice snake owner. All around, it is better to buy a captive-born hatchling or an established, well-feeding juvenile, sub-adult or adult than an imported Ball.

In captivity, young Balls will grow about a foot a year during the first three years. They will reach sexual maturity in three to five years. The longest living Ball python on record was over 28 years old when it died. Egg-layers, female Balls encircle their four to ten eggs, remaining with them from the time they are laid until they hatch. During this three month period, they will not leave the eggs and will not eat.

GETTING STARTED

Selecting Your Ball Python

Choose an animal that has clear firm skin, rounded body shape, clean vent, clear eyes, and who actively flicks its tongue around when handled. All Balls are naturally shy about having their heads touched or handled by strangers; a normal reaction is for the Ball to pull its head and neck sharply away from such contact. When held, the snake should grip you gently but firmly when moving around. It should be alert to its surroundings. All young snakes are food for other, larger snakes, birds, lizards and mammalian predators so your hatchling may be a bit nervous at first but should settle down quickly.

Selecting an escape-proof enclosure

Select an enclosure especially designed for housing snakes, such as the Critter Cottages with the combination fixed screen/hinged glass top. All snakes are escape artists; Balls are especially powerful and cunning when it comes to breaking out. A good starter tank for a hatchling is a 10 gallon tank (approx. 20"L x 10"W). A young adult requires a 20 gallon tank, and a large adult may require a 30 gallon tank (36" x 12"W).

Suitable substrate

Use paper towels or newspapers at first. These are easily and quickly removed and replaced when soiled and, with an import, will allow you to better monitor for the presence of mites and the condition of the feces. Once the animal is established, you can use more decorative ground cover such as commercially prepared shredded cypress or fir bark. Pine and aspen shavings should not be used as they can become lodged in the mouth while eating, causing respiratory and other problems. The shavings must be monitored closely and all soiled and wet shavings pulled out immediately to prevent bacteria and fungus growths. The utilitarian approach is to use inexpensive astroturf. Extra pieces can be kept in reserve and used when the soiled piece is removed for cleaning and drying (soak in one part bleach to 30 parts water; rinse thoroughly, and dry completely before reuse). Remember: the easier it is to clean, the faster you'll do it!

Provide a hiding place

A half-log is available at pet stores. An empty cardboard box or upside-down opaque plastic container, both with an access doorway cut into one end, can also be used. The plastic is easily cleaned when necessary; the box can be tossed out when soiled and replaced with a new one. The box or log must be big enough for the snake to hide its entire body inside; if you start with a small one, you will need to eventually replace it as your snake grows. Balls prefer dark places for sleeping and, as they are nocturnal, they like the dark place during our daylight hours. Place a nice climbing branch or two in the tank with some fake greenery screening part of it; your Ball will enjoy hanging out in the "tree."

Proper temperature range is essential to keeping your snake healthy. The ambient air temperature throughout the enclosure must be maintained between 80-85oF during the day, with a basking area kept at 90oF. At night, the ambient air temperature may be allowed to drop down no lower than 75oF. Special reptile heating pads that are manufactured to maintain a temperature about 20o higher than the air temperature may be used inside the enclosure. There are adhesive pads that can be stuck to the underside of a glass enclosure. Heating pads made for people, available at all drug stores, are also available; these have built-in hi-med-lo switches and can be used under a glass enclosure. You can also use incandescent light bulbs in porcelain and metal reflector hoods to provide the additional heat required for the basking area. All lights must be screened off to prevent the snake from burning itself. All pythons, especially Ball pythons, are very susceptible to thermal burns. For this same reason do not use a hot rock. Buy at least two thermometers - one to use in the overall area 1" above the enclosure floor, and the other 1" above the floor in the basking area. Don't try to guess the temperature - you will either end up with a snake who will be too cold to eat and digest its food or one ill or dead from overheating.

No special lighting is needed

Balls are nocturnal snakes, spending their days in the wild securely hidden away

from possible predators. To make it easier to see your Ball during the day, you can use a full-spectrum light or low wattage incandescent bulb in the enclosure during the day. Make sure the snake cannot get into direct contact with the light bulbs. Balls are very prone to getting seriously burned.

Feeding.

Allow your snake to acclimate to its new home for a couple of weeks. Start your hatchling (about 15" in length) off with a single pre-killed week to 10-day old "fuzzy" mouse. A smaller sized hatchling may require a smaller mouse; try a pre-killed 5-day old. Older Balls may be fed larger pre-killed mice or pinkie rats. If you have not had any experience force feeding a snake, you may not want to try it yourself until you have seen someone do it. Force feeding, whether of a mouse or a formula inserted by catheter and syringe, is very stressful for the snake (and it isn't much fun for the owner!). If your new Ball has gone several months without eating and is beginning to noticeably lose weight, take it to a reptile vet or contact your local herpetology society and ask to speak to someone who is knowledgeable about Ball pythons and feeding problems. A good inexpensive book that covers some of the tricks to enticing reluctant Balls to feed is *The Care and Maintenance of Ball Pythons* by Philippe de Vosjoli (1990, Advanced Vivarium Systems, Lakeside, CA.)

Provide a bowl of fresh water at all times; your snake will both drink and soak, and may defecate, in it. Check it daily and change when soiled.

Routine veterinary screening for newly acquired snakes is very important. Many of the parasites infesting Balls and other reptiles can be transmitted to humans and other reptiles. Left untreated, such infestations can ultimately kill your snake. When your snake first defecates, collect the feces in a clean plastic bag, seal it, label it with the date, your name and phone number and the snake's name, then take it and your snake to a vet who is experienced with reptiles. There it will be tested and the proper medication given.

Handling your new snake

After giving your Ball a couple of days to settle in, begin picking it up and handling it gently. It may move from you, and may threaten you by doing tail lashings and hissing. Be gentle but persistent. Daily contact will begin to establish a level of trust and confidence between you and your snake. When it is comfortable with you, you can begin taking it around the house. Don't get over-confident! Given a chance and close proximity to seat cushions, your Ball will make a run (well, a slither) for it, easing down between the cushions and from there, to points possibly unknown. Always be gentle, and try to avoid sudden movements. If the snake wraps around your arm or neck, you can unwind it by gently unwrapping it from around you starting from its tail end - not the head.

Necessities

Some things you should have on hand for general maintenance and first aid include: Novalsan (Chlorhexidine diacetate) for cleaning enclosures and disinfecting food and water bowls, litter boxes, tubs and sinks etc. Betadine (povidone/iodine) for cleansing scratches and wounds. Set aside a food storage bowl, feeding and water bowls, soaking bowl or tub.

Ball Python Feeding Problems

Most ball pythons in the pet trade are imported from Africa. In Africa, they do not eat mice. They do not recognize mice as being food. They are crated up and shipped off around the world, the hatchlings sent off before they've even had a meal. They

get dumped into pet stores who know little about them and will cheerfully sell them saying "Hey, it's a great eater!" when in fact the animal has never eaten.

Compound this with the fact that the animals are stressed and heavily parasitized and dehydrated, and you have an animal that may well die unless it gets into the hands of someone who knows what is going on.

If at all possible, you should try to get the python to feed voluntarily before resorting to force feeding (stuffing a mouse or feeding tube down its throat). It will be less stressful for the python--and you.

One key thing is to evaluate the environment. If the environment is not set up appropriately for the ball python, no amount of tricks in the world will get it to feed properly. Make sure the temperatures are in the proper range (mid 70s to high 80s during the day, low 70s to low 80s at night). Balls, like all snakes, do not require UVB supplemental lighting. They, like all reptiles, need a dark period at night. If you are using a light bulb to provide the heat, you cannot use a white or other bright bulb at night. Use an undertank heating pad, a properly shielded ceramic heating element, or a dark blue or red bulb. Although they come from a very arid environment, they spend a great deal of time in underground burrows or rocky crevices where the humidity is higher. Keep a bowl of water big enough for the snake to comfortably curl up in inside the enclosure at all times. Keep it on the cool, not the warm, side of the enclosure.

Tricks to Encouraging Self-feeding:

A healthy ball may be tricked into eating in a couple of different ways:

1. Provide a dark hidebox for it - an inverted flower pot with a hole in it, a cardboard box, half log, hollow log section, ceramic cave - whatever works. It is okay if the snake's body touches all the sides when it is inside - they feel more secure this way. Dangle killed or stunned prey (use forceps) in front of the opening. Be prepared for the snake to strike and DON'T jerk the prey back! If you do, you will have discouraged the ball and he will not strike again. Leave him alone for several days before trying again. You may have better success offering a smaller prey item for the next feedings.

2. Feed at night, not during the day. These are nocturnal snakes and may be uncomfortable feeding during the day. Once they are fully acclimated to captivity-- and you-- they will often take food during the day.

3. If it takes the prey but won't eat, or won't take it, drop the mouse inside, and swathe the enclosure with towels to block the snake from seeing anybody or anything and leave it alone for 24 hours. Resist the temptation to peek! Do NOT do this with a live gerbil, however!

4. If gerbils are legal in your state, try feeding stunned, then killed gerbils (do not leave a live gerbil in with your snake - the gerbil is more likely to bite the snake than the snake is to grab the gerbil, and once bitten, the snake is less likely to try to eat). If it takes them, start rubbing killed mice on gerbils to scent them, and offer the mice (a killed gerbil can be used repeatedly if kept frozen and defrosted when needed for scenting).

5. If the python is regurgitating its meal, this may be a sign that the enclosure is too cold, or that it has an internal parasite infection, or that the prey was too big.

* Check to make sure that the temperatures are in the correct range. If they were too cool, wait a couple of days and try again - with smaller, more easily digestible, prey.

* If the regurgitated prey is extremely smelly, it is a sign that there may be a protozoan infection going on. The snake (and the securely bagged prey) should be

taken to a reptile vet to have the condition checked out and treated.

* Snakes, as a rule, can eat anything that is as big across the shoulders as the snake is wide in the body. However, this doesn't mean that they should! Bigger prey is harder to digest, and less efficiently digested, than smaller prey. And most snakes will regurgitate prey that is too big. It is better to feed two or three smaller prey items at a feeding session than one large one.

6. Try feeding more colorful prey. Not only do they not recognize mice as being 'food,' they don't recognize red-eyed whited mice as being food! Get parti-colored mice, mice with black, brown and gray colors mixed in their fur. While small hamsters are suitable for food, guinea pigs of any size are not - their fur and skin is much too thick to adequately digest. Chicks are not as nutritious as rodents, and rabbit, even pink (newborn) rabbits are too big. It is best to get your python feeding on rodents (or killed or stunned gerbils, in states where they are legal) as quickly as possible.

If your snake is seriously thin (triangular in cross-section, with the backbone visible), you will have to resort to force feeding. Rather than shoving a mouse or other prey item down its throat, it is actually less stressful, and more beneficial, to make a feeding slurry and administer it using a syringe and lubricated gastric feeding tube. This will enable you to get the feeding down more quickly using a highly digestible food product. This means that the snake will burn up less calories fighting you, and will not have to work at breaking through fur, skin and bones for a couple of days to get to the meat of the matter. Being more highly digestible means that it will take less effort to digest and more nutrients will be extracted from it.

Veterinary Care

You've bought the snake, you bought the enclosure and furnishings, you bought the book (you DID buy the book, didn't you?) on ball python care. You may have had to buy off your parents, spouse or significant other to let you have the snake. The last thing you probably want to do is to spend money at the vets. One of the best kept secrets in the pet trade is that EVERY animal should be seen by a vet shortly after acquisition to make sure that it is healthy, and to begin immediately to correct the situation if it is not.

External parasites are easy to see; internal ones are not, not unless you have a microscope, slides, fecal flotation solution and know what you are looking for. Many people think they can just use any worming or antiprotozoan medication to treat their snakes or lizards, ignoring the fact that certain medications work only against certain organisms. Treating with one type of medication may have no effect on the organism causing the problem, giving you a false sense of security that you have corrected the situation...only to find, often too late, that you didn't.

Vets can not only check for protozoans and worms, they can assess the nutritional and hydration status of your snake. Force feeding a dehydrated animal will kill it. If you do not know how to assess hydration, and you feed even an easily digestible formula, you may send your snake into shock, even having diluted it with either of the two electrolyte solutions.

So, wait, you're saying, how can I get a fecal exam if I can't get any feces because my snake won't eat? Your vet can do a cloacal wash, syringing fluid into the cloaca then syringing it back out again, using the fluid to do the microscopic exams.