

## A Care Sheet for Snakes

by Alan Kerslake



The snake that I would advise the beginner to start with would be a Corn or Rat Snake. Either that or a King Snake. These come under the family of Colubridae and are harmless. They are usually docile with some exceptions. But I don't believe that any snake is nasty by nature, just scared and defensive.

The Texas rat snake for instance will usually strike as you try to take it from the vivarium, but once it is out and in your hands, as long as you don't move fast, it is fine.

Some snakes may take some handling before they realise you mean them no harm and before they become tame. So make sure that when you buy your snake that you see it being handled first, and handle it yourself.

### Housing.

The vivarium can be of glass, wood with a glass front or plastic, or fibreglass. The easiest to clean are glass, plastic and fibreglass tanks, but the warmest are wooden. Most keepers prefer to make their own out of Conti Board, also called Melamine, with a glass front of sliding doors and maybe a ledge to climb on.

The heating can simply be a heat mat. This should cover about a third of the floor space, and I would advise putting it in the tank rather than under it. There is no need for lights as long as there is some light entering the room from a window. If you have snakes that all require the same heat, you can have the room itself heated to the required temperature. To do this you will need to use a thermostat wired to the room heater or to the heat pads.

A batch of pads going to different tanks can be wired to the one thermostat as long as the snakes all require the same heating. But make sure you get a competent person to do this for you if you are not sure yourself.

Most of the above mentioned snakes will be happy with an ambient temperature of around 82-84 degrees Fahrenheit.

### Cage furniture

You will need to have something for the snake to hide in and feel safe in at both ends of the vivarium. One at the cool end and one on the heat mat.

These hides can simply be a cardboard box with a hole cut in it for the snake to enter, or a plastic box, or one of the commercially sold boxes. Or you can take some flat stones (cleaned well beforehand) and stick them together with aquarium glue to form a sort of cave. The snake needs to feel snug in it. If it is a tight fit, it will be happiest. The size of the tank should be around a half a square foot floor space for every foot of the snake for snakes up to six feet in length, then three quarters of a square foot for each foot over that length. Too large a tank and the snake will feel insecure and won't eat.

Don't handle the snake too much at first, or again it won't eat. Don't forget a water bowl, and keep it filled with clean water.

### Substrate

Substrate or floor covering, can be simple or elaborate. There are commercially sold products for placing on the floor of the vivarium. But I would suggest newspaper or what I use, towelling, of the right colour can look from a short distance a bit like grass, earth or sand. When the towelling is soiled by the snake, remove it, clean the surface with warm water and spray it with one of the commercially sold cleaning products, then keep the soiled towels in a bag until you have enough to make it worth putting them in to the washing machine. The vivarium should be kept perfectly clean and done at least once a week.

## Feeding

Snakes will not eat vegi-burgers, they are carnivores and will only eat meat. Usually they eat dead mice or rats. You can buy them from your local pet store or if you have many snakes you can buy them in bulk (Look at our links page).

These are frozen, and you first have to de-frost them. Either put out the required number of mice in the morning and let them de-frost normally, or put them in to hot water (not boiling) and de-frost them quickly. Dry them off and then using a tongs hold them in front of the snake and jiggle it about, this will usually bring a response from the snake by him striking at it and swallowing it whole. The strike of a snake can be as fast as 170 miles an hour; this can be scary when you first try it. And if you don't use a tongs you can get bitten by mistake, the eyesight of a snake is not that good. Snakes have up to 200 teeth, but they are relatively small and won't cause you much harm although you may bleed a little. The snake will coil around the food item and "kill" it. (It doesn't know it is already dead) The constriction in the wild will suffocate the animal quickly. All the above snakes are constrictors.

Be warned, hungry snakes can eat their cage mates. This is certainly the case with King Snakes and Milk Snakes who eat snakes in the wild. These must be housed singly. You are likely to be safe in keeping corn or rat snakes together though as long as they are well fed.



## How often should you feed?

You need to only feed one mouse every 7 to 10 days. Over feeding will kill your snake before its time. And these snakes can live over 20 years. Hatchlings should be fed pinkies, these are newly born mice, a little older, fuzzies, these are young mice with fur, and so on up to large mice or rats as the snake grows. A good measure of what size to feed is to look at the middle of the snake, and feed a mouse around the same size as that.

The mouth of the snake can open to a frightening degree. and will swallow food items that seem to be far too big. It is the equivalent of a man swallowing a basketball.

If your snake won't eat it can be for several reasons. It could be coming up to a slough (shedding its skin) snakes shed their skin periodically. More often when young and they rub their noses to break the old skin and then wriggle out of it. Before they do this, their eyes will become milky and they can't see, after while they will clear and then within usually 5 days they will shed. Snakes coming up to shedding will not eat.

Another reason for refusing to feed is, the heating is too low or too high, check your heating. And get a book on the snake you wish to keep first to see about heating and humidity. Tropical snakes will need to have it more humid, so the water bowl should be put on the heat pad to make it more humid, and maybe spraying daily may be needed. Get a book on your snake to make sure how it should be kept.

Another reason for not eating is it is the breeding season, and like most men, they only have one thing on their mind. Sex. So don't panic if the snake won't eat, I have had a pair of spotted pythons go six months without eating and then eat like pigs.

Royal (or ball) pythons are well known for being finicky eaters. But if you keep the heat up and keep them in a relatively small viv, they will usually eat.

Don't feed live food. If the snake doesn't eat it, a live mouse can damage or even kill the snake.

## Record keeping.

It is vital that you keep a record of your snakes' activities. When it eats or doesn't eat. When it

sloughs, etc. This can be as simple or as complex as you like, but if you don't keep records, believe me, you won't remember when you fed last.

### Parasites and diseases.

The problems that most keepers come up against are mites, mouth rot or worms in the gut. If you only feed commercially grown mice and rats, and only buy captive bred (CB) snakes you are not likely to get trouble with worms.

All new snakes should be quarantined- kept in a separate room from the others snakes for a couple of months. If this is not possible, keep it as far away from the others as you can. Ticks are only found on wild caught (WC) so only buy CB.

Mites are a problem and these are so small they can be not noticed for a while until you see some specks in the water bowl. Run your hand over the snake and look at your hand. Tiny spots moving, means mites. How do you get rid of them? You must get a No-Pest strip, they come in various names and packaged in a plastic sleeve that you are supposed to slide apart to reveal the strip. Break all this away and cut the strip up into two inch squares. Put each one into a plastic container drilled with small holes and remove the water dish. Put this in with the snake and leave for a few days. If you have many snakes, do this with each one. After a few days remove the strip; only replace the water dish after cleaning out the tank and scrubbing it clean. Repeat in a week to ten days and again in another week. To feel safe, repeat it again on the next week.

Be warned, if you have other critters in the room such as tarantulas, the powerful insecticide on the strip can kill them if too close to them and it will kill the crickets, too. I know from experience.

Mouth rot is detected by seeing the snake open its mouth a lot and a bubbly spittle and reddening of the mouth is seen. A solution of three percent hydrogen peroxide can be swabbed into the mouth with a small paint brush and repeat in a few days, it should clear up.

### Some useful terms.

**Aestivation.** Inactive during heat.

**Anerythristic.** Lacking red pigment.

**Arboreal.** Climbs, lives in the trees in nature.

**Cloaca.** Vent through which the snake gets rid of its waste, both solid and urine, which is powdery.

**Colubridae.** Common snakes, the biggest group with over 1,500 species.

**Crepuscular.** Comes out in the twilight.

**Dimorphic.** Different in form, build, or colour in same species.

**Diurnal.** Daytime feeder.

**Ectothermic.** Cold blooded.

**Erythristic.** Prevalent red pigment.

**Fecund.** Fertile.

**Gravid.** Pregnant.

**Jacobson's organ.** The organ in the mouth which picks up the scent from the tongue and tells the brain what it is.

**Leucistic.** Without black pigment, white, lacking pattern and eyes black or blue.

**Melanistic.** Profusion of black pigment.

**Slough.** Shed the skin.

Care sheet by Alan Kerslake, member of IHS, SWREAG and BTG.