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Ball Python Care Sheet

Ball Python or Royal Python (*Python regius*)

Temperament:

Ball Pythons have some of the best temperaments in the snake world, on par with Corn Snakes and some King snakes. Their first line of defense is to roll up into a ball when threatened (hence their common name). They make a great first snake for children and novice snake enthusiasts provided you choose a Captive Bred individual. Wild Caught specimens can be difficult to acclimate and often will have feeding problems, external and internal parasites, and exhibit signs of stress. As a note, it should be remembered that ALL snakes can bite and if provoked enough, Ball Pythons will as well. You should not leave your small children alone with your pet. Older children that exhibit respect and an understanding of the snake will be fine. My son is six and has been around snakes all his life and we still only let him touch the snakes when we are present. Also, special attention should be paid when your children's friends are visiting (and some adults for that matter) to ensure that accidental injuries to both snake and child do not occur.

Region:

Ball Pythons are predominantly a terrestrial snake from the open forests or savanna grasslands of Central and Western Africa.

Size:

Ball Pythons range in size from three to five feet with females typically being the larger of the species. Some individuals can reach six feet but they are less common. They typically grow about twelve inches per year for the first three years and then slow down until they reach their maximum size.

Lifespan:

The average lifespan for ball pythons is twenty to thirty years with the record of forty-seven years being held for a specimen at the Philadelphia Zoo (now deceased).

Ball Python Care

Enclosure:

There are many choices on the market for housing your snake. Foremost to consider are safety, suitability, and taste. Ball Pythons, like all snakes, are excellent escape artists. Their life, while in your home, will consist of sleeping in the day (when you let them) and looking for food, water and/or an escape route each night. They are surprisingly strong and very adept at finding small crevices to squeeze through or unlocked lids to lift up. For your snake's sake and your own sanity, please ensure your enclosure has a locking method or can be securely closed. Next on the list is suitability. This includes the actual environment that will contain your snake. While juveniles, Ball Pythons can be housed in a 10-gallon aquarium comfortably (think ten inches by twenty inches). As they grow, they will require a larger enclosure, 20-gallon long aquariums (or twelve by thirty inches) are fine for most adults. We house our breeding stock in professional breeder rack systems that provide a floor space seventeen inches by thirty-three inches. Our display (think pets) snakes are housed in 20-gallon long aquariums as described above.

Temperature/Lighting:

The daytime temperature should be 80-85 degrees with a "hot spot" of 90-95 degrees. Nighttime temperatures should be maintained at 75-80 degrees with a "hot spot" supplied. The best method I have found to maintain this thermal gradient is to incorporate an Under the Tank Heater (UTH) on one end of the aquarium and a basking light on the other end. The UTH maintains the ambient temperature and the basking light provides the "hot spot". I use a 75 watt reptile bulb (white light) during the day and a 75 watt night reptile bulb (red light) at night so that they snakes have a day-night cycle as in nature. Leaving a bright light on all night can stress your pet. Remember, Ball Pythons do not require bright lighting to remain healthy, this is supplemental heating. The visual aspects are for your enjoyment! NEVER USE A HEAT ROCK to heat your snake's enclosure, they can cause severe burns to Ball Pythons.

Humidity:

You will need to try to maintain relative humidity between 50% to 70%. Some increase the humidity when the snake is ready to shed to 80% to aid in this process. This is a personal choice that should be based upon how well the snake has shed in the past for you. In my breeder racks, we can easily maintain the proper humidity but it is more difficult in the aquariums. One trick that helps is to go to your local Home Depot and purchase a piece of plexi-glass (about \$10.00) and cut it to fit over about 3/4 of the aquarium screen. This will help maintain the humidity and still allow for airflow (place your heat lamps on the open end away from the plexi-glass to avoid the risk of fire. You can also mist your enclosure daily if required. Having said this, please do not keep your snake in a wet environment, respiratory problems can develop. Remember, 50% to 70% humidity does not equal wet.

Substrate:

Bedding choices consist mainly of aspen, coconut bark or fir bark. My choice is coconut bark in my display tanks and aspen in my breeder racks. I have heard that Fir Bark can carry mites and must be heated before use (I have never seen this but thought it was worth mentioning). NEVER USE PINE OR CEDAR SHAVINGS as the phenols they release are toxic to snakes. Many also use newspaper, paper towels, and AstroTurf which are all acceptable substrate but on the ugly side.

Hide Boxes:

Hide boxes must be provided for the ball python to become comfortable with their surroundings. They are secretive nocturnal snakes that need to feel safe. The best way to accomplish this is by providing a hide box on the cool end AND the warm end of the enclosure. This way your snake can choose between the boxes that best meet its' needs at the moment without sacrificing warmth for security.

Feeding:

Feeding of your snake should be performed on a regular schedule. We feed our snakes once a week (Saturdays) an appropriate sized rodent. This means that we give our snakes a mouse or rat that is about the same size as the widest circumference of the snake. I feed my snakes pre-killed frozen/thawed rodents but the choice is up to you if you would like to feed your snake live rodents. This is a hotly contested subject in the reptile world so I will only say this about it, if you choose to feed live prey to your snake, be sure to observe the feeding the entire time. Many stories have been told about the mouse or rat taking a nice bite out of the snake and a nasty infection or death being the result. Snakes are designed to kill their prey and very well equipped for this activity BUT you have an investment in your pet and unless you are fine with some scars, please feed frozen/thawed prey. I also feed my snakes in a separate box and not in their normal enclosure. This helps to ensure that my hand reaching into their enclosure is not directly associated with food at the other end. Balls Pythons do not rely on their eye-site when hunting but instead use their heat receptors located on their heads. My hand could be several degrees warmer than the dead mouse and be mistaken for a meal.

I feed my snakes in a small plastic container that has no substrate in the bottom (this aids in cleaning afterwards). I also use twelve-inch tongs to hold the mouse or rat by the tail further lessening any chance for a mistaken bite. You may need to wiggle your rodent of choice to simulate life to entice your snake to strike if you are feeding F/T.

Water dish:

Fresh water must be provided at all times to your snake. I use a bowl that is sturdy to avoid tipping over and large enough for the snake to soak in if they choose. Ball Pythons are not typically snakes that bask in water but occasionally do for shedding purposes or on a whim.

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