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## Colorado Reptile Humane Society's Guide to Caring For Boa Constrictors

### General Information

Boa Constrictors are beautifully marked, moderately arboreal snakes. Most boas on the retail market are *B. c. imperator* from Columbia, Mexico, Hogg Island and Central America as well as the red-tailed Boa constrictor constrictor imported from Brazil, Columbia, the Amazon, Guyana, and Surinam. Seven other subspecies of *B. constrictor* from South America are also available in the pet trade. Boas are primarily nocturnal or crepuscular (active at dawn and dusk). Snakes living in the consistent high humidity of the rain forests remain active all year. In extreme northern and southern portions of their range, boas often go through several weeks of inactivity (brumation) during periods of cold or drought. This behavior may occur in captivity as the weather changes throughout the year.

### Habitat

CoRHS recommends enclosures of a minimum 5 feet high, 4 feet long and 3 feet deep. Avoid using unfinished wood or other porous materials. These are difficult to clean and can harbor disease. Boas are excellent escape artists. Make sure the enclosure is well secured with no small openings.

Suitable substrates are shredded cypress or fir bark, newspaper or Astroturf. Do not use pine, cedar or aspen shavings. Pine and cedar emits toxic fumes and all wood shavings substrates can become lodged in the digestive tract, causing respiratory problems, impaction and other illnesses. Cypress mulch is an excellent substrate for areas with a dry climate as it maintains moisture much better than most "off the shelf" substrates.

Provide large limbs and shelves for climbing and basking. Provide hide boxes for privacy. Keep a large bowl of fresh water available at all times for drinking, soaking and to increase the humidity in the enclosure. Check it often and change the water every 2-3 days.

### Temperature

Daytime temperatures should be 80-85°F in the main part of the enclosure with a basking area of 95°F. Night time temperatures should be 75-80°F. These temperatures can be maintained with the use of infrared mats, basking bulbs, or ceramic emitters. Do not use hot rocks or bulbs greater than 100 watts as these can cause burns.

### Lighting

Boas do well with a 12-hour photo period. No special UV lighting is required. Use fluorescent or low wattage incandescent bulbs in the enclosure during the day.

### Maintenance

The enclosure should be spot checked for feces daily. Remove and replace soiled and wet portions of the substrate right away to prevent bacteria and fungus growth. Change the substrate and disinfect the enclosure with a 5% bleach solution on a regular basis. Avoid cleansers such as Lysol or Pine-Sol as they may leave a toxic residue. Rinse the enclosure thoroughly with clear water after cleaning with any detergent or bleach solution. Always wash your hands thoroughly after handling the snake or cleaning the enclosure and accessories.

## **Diet**

Boas are strictly carnivores. Feed prey items that are no wider than the widest part of the snake's body. Offer fuzzy mice to young boas every 5-7 seven days. Feed large adults 2 or 3 large rats every 2-3 weeks. For the safety of the snake and the humane treatment of the prey, feed only pre-killed prey. Defrost frozen prey then place it in a ziplock bag and put it in hot water for 15-20 minutes or until the prey feels warmed all the way through. Snakes can sense heat and may not eat the prey if they sense it is cold inside. Avoid handling the snake for 24 hours after feeding to preclude regurgitation.

## **Shedding**

Snakes shed their skin every one to three months. The skin turns milky for several days, and then the eyes become cloudy for a few days. The skin is shed a few days after the eyes clear. Most snakes refuse food during this period. Some become irritable and nippy. It is important not to handle the snake once their eyes turn cloudy unless to soak, as they cannot see and may feel threatened. Compare their skin during this period to that of a bad sun burn which would be painful if touched.

Daily spraying with water after the eyes clear helps the shed process. If some skin remains unshed, soak the snake for 20-30 minutes in shallow water at 75-85°F. Then gently rub off the old skin with a warm, wet bath towel. Never forcefully remove unshed skin.

## **Veterinary Care**

Routine veterinary screening for newly acquired snakes is advised. Many of the parasites infesting boas can be transmitted to humans.

With any sign of illness we recommend a visit to your reptile veterinarian as soon as possible. In boas, watch for swollen gums, nasal discharge, noisy breathing, and loss of appetite for extended periods.

To locate an experienced reptile veterinarian in your area, visit: [www.herpvetconnection.com](http://www.herpvetconnection.com).

## **For Further Reading**

[The General Care and Maintenance of Red-Tailed Boas](#)

By Philippe de Vosjoli

Published by Advanced Vivarium Systems, 1990

[The Boa Constrictor Manual](#)

By Philippe de Vosjoli, Roger K. Dum and Jeff Ronne

Published by Advanced Vivarium Systems, 1998

Melissa Kaplan's Herp Care Collection

<http://www.anapsid.org>

Western New York Herpetological Society

<http://www.wnyherp.org>

*This guide was updated in April 2008.  
Please contact [info@corhs.org](mailto:info@corhs.org) for  
more information.*