
THE DICE SNAKE, *NATRIX TESSELATA*.

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DESCRIPTION

This small snake normally grows up to 80 cm, but in the warmer parts of its distribution may grow to over 100 cm. Usually it has a small pointed head, round pupils and mid-way along the trunk usually 19 rows of strongly keeled dorsal scales. The dorsal is light grey or light green with dark spots in rows. The belly is chequered white or yellowish and black. This snake sometimes has an inverted V-shape on its neck. Albinos and melanistic specimens are found.

Dice snakes are perfect swimmers. They can stay under water for a considerable length of time and can even sleep submerged. This snake rarely bites even when handled. But they do have the nasty habit sometimes, of releasing a foul smelling fluid from the vent. Generally it is a shy snake that hisses at danger and retreats.

DISTRIBUTION

Dice snakes live in a large part of the

Balkans, in Italy (except in the extreme south), north to south Switzerland, east Austria, Czechoslovakia and in southern U.S.S.R. There are isolated colonies in western Austria (Vorarl Mountain), north-east Switzerland (Vierwaldstätter See), in the areas along the Rhine, Elbe, on Crete and Kythira. Also east to south-west and central Asia.

HABITAT

Natrix tessellata lives on both plains and mountains, but always in the vicinity of water. In the north-western part of his habitat some isolated colonies exclusively live in river valleys with rocky sides. Here the rocks, that are heated by the sun, create a special micro climate with the exact temperatures. In the south of Europe it lives in large lakes, where it can be found along its banks. In Central Asia it can be found near streams in the clay hills. In some areas they live in hot water springs.

TERRARIUM AND DECORATION

My snakes live in a wooden terrarium which is 65 cm in length, 45 cm deep and 75 cm high. The front of the terrarium consists of two glass sliding windows. In the sides and top ventilation holes are present. While only the front of the terrarium is of glass the snakes have lots of opportunities to hide. As a result of this my snakes are calm and easy to handle. Two 20 Watt tubes supply

the light. The two tubes which are in the top of the terrarium can be switched on and off separately. One supplies white and the other violet light. There is also a 25 Watt bulb in the terrarium at a lower level. Heating consists of the 25 Watt bulb, but some heating is gained from the choke-coils of the tubes. This is a built in metal box with a grate on top. This heating source heats up to one third of the bottom. Both heating sources are situated on one side of the terrarium so there is a warm and a cold side. This keeps the snakes very active. The humidity is increased by placing a bowl of warm water in the terrarium or by spraying luke-warm water. Normally the humidity is about 60% but this can increase up to 95%. During the summer the daily temperature is about 30°C dropping at night to about 25°C. The terrarium is lighted thirteen hours a day from 8 in the morning to about 9 at night. At the end of November I reduce the temperature to about 10°C and the time of lighting to 9 hours.

The snakes have a winterrest up to February. Then both temperature and light intensity are increased. During the winterrest I hardly ever feed the snakes. When they are being fed they get soft fish which is easy digestable even at low temperatures.

The decoration of the terrarium: both the sides and back are decorated with cork, which gives ample climbing facilities. This gives a natural impression. The bottom is covered with slate, a water trough with a diameter of 20 cm and two pots for hiding places. This decoration is completed by some coiled climbing branches and two plants that are hanging in the terrarium.

MY OWN SNAKES

I keep and care for two dice snakes, a male and a female. The female is grey with black, chequered spots on her back. The belly is yellow and black chequered. On her neck there is a black inverted V. When I bought her she was 80 cm long but is now at least 100 cm. This snake originates from the U.S.S.R. The male is older and longer than the female. He looks completely different. This snake is dark grey to black and has some vague black spots on its back. When I bought this snake it was about 95 cm in length now he is about 107 cm in length. This snake also comes from the U.S.S.R. I have only noticed matings when they were put together after a period of quarantine. This however, let to no success.

FOOD

The snakes are fed three to four times a month, their food mainly consists of fish. Changes in types of food are vital though I give them several types of fish, such as: smelt, mudcreepers, goldfish, carps and different types of feeding fish. The female accepts only live prey but the male will eat dead fish.

During the summer to prevent a lack of vitamins I allow the snakes to bask in the sun now and then. While feeding I now and then add Bogena V12 to the water. The snakes are fed separately so I can keep a record of what each individual eats. When the

snake or snakes see the fish they slide to the water's edge with speed. Normally they grab the fish by the head and swallow it. After which the prey is pressed to the stomach and the snake goes to rest on a heating source to digest its prey.

TAKING CARE OF

As I would rather prevent diseases than cure them I regularly disinfect the terrarium with Citopogeen disinfectants and deodorant. My snakes have never been bothered by ticks, mites or pox. This as a result of

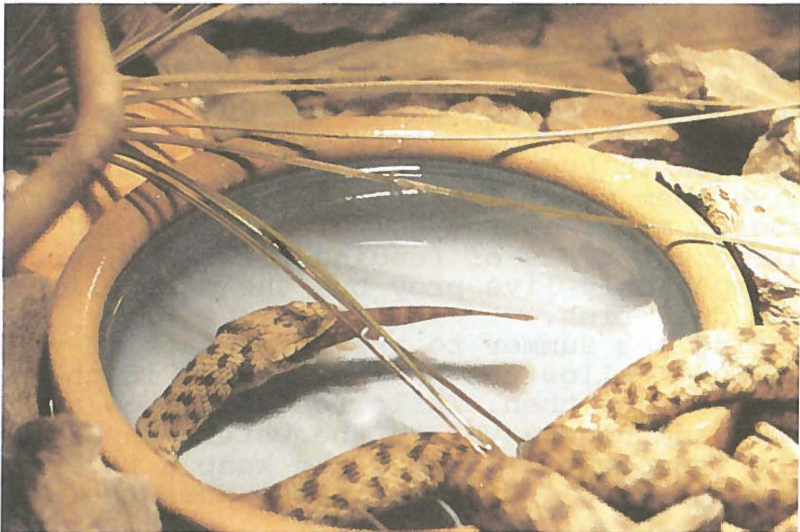


Foto 1: *Natrix tessellata*, etend, eating.
foto R. Wishaupt.

the dry terrarium. When the snakes leave the water they must be able to find a dry spot straight away. Twice a year they are treated against internal parasites, such as worms. The powder which is subscribed by a vet can either be injected into, or sprinkled over the prey. I remove faeces immediately and always disinfect the spot. Every day I give them fresh water which they not only love to drink but also to deposit their droppings in.

IN SUMMARY

For keeping dice snakes healthy I recommend the following:

- Hygiene is vital.
- The terrarium should be dry (although the books say otherwise).
- A twice a year treatment against internal parasites is very important.
- Prevent a lack of vitamins by adding them either into the water or on the prey. Direct sun is good as well
- Not vital but recommended are hiding places for the snakes. As a result of this your snakes will be calm when picked up and hardly ever spray their filthy smelling liquid.

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