



# CARE SHEET FOR RED-TAILED BOAS

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## ■ INTRODUCTION

The following (assuming you have intelligently made the decision to purchase a *Boa constrictor*) are basic guidelines for proper care and maintenance of your new pet. Red-tailed boas (or *Boa constrictor constrictor*, *B. c. imperator*, and a few others) range from Colombia, Mexico, Central America, and others. It should be noted that "Red-Tailed Boa" is a trade name interchanged with just about all the ssp. The true Colombian red-tailed boas tend to be rare, and it is speculated by some that the name Red-Tailed Boa was coined for its appeal over the constrictor name and the negative image it may imply.

## ■ SELECTION

If possible, captive bred animals should always be selected. They tend to be much healthier and make better pets overall. This also helps to help encourage breeding rather than collection. Always deal with reputable dealers and high quality pet stores. If the snake must be an import, be very careful when it comes to selection. A docile specimen should move forward and flick its tongue in a regular fashion. A fast moving short flick

is generally associated with curiosity, where a long, slow flick with very little up/down movement is usually a sign of possible "defensive" feelings. A truly defensive Boa will make its intentions very well known. Normal actions are pulling into a strike position and hissing. A specimen will most likely calm down with interaction, but a calm specimen is a much more enjoyable pet. Check for mucous in mouth (representative of infection), eye shape and colour, and lumps in body (due to broken ribs or malnutrition). Hunger folds are another sign of malnutrition. Although it is generally not a problem with Red-Tails, check to see if the specimen is a known feeder. Ask to be allowed to watch the next time it is fed, maybe even offering to purchase the food. However, I would wait at least 1-2 days before moving a just fed Boa. Also look for mites. Mites are no reason to reject a snake, but are definitely something to look out for.

## ■ SIZE

I have seen neonates ranging from 12 to 24 inches. Growth in newborns is very rapid, between 3 - 5 feet in one year. The second year can yield lengths of 4 to 7 feet. Adults range anywhere from 5 to 10 feet, with an occasional 12 and 15 footer thrown in just to keep us all on our toes.

Growth is directly related to diet and housing conditions. However, unlike fish, a reptile WILL outgrow its

surroundings. Keeping a Boa in a 20 gallon tank WILL NOT keep it from growing. Diet can be used to control growth, but I do not recommend it. If you can't take the size, get a smaller animal! Feed that puppy and let it grow!

### ■ FEEDING

Newborns should be fed every 5 days. Start on pinkies, and work up from there. As the snake increases in size, feeding can be cut back to every seven to ten days. Feeding can be done every 2 weeks, or even less in emergency situations, but this is not recommended. Your pet will be much healthier if fed a reasonable meal weekly than if gorged every two weeks. Prey items should be approximately the same diameter as the snake (both at the widest part of the body).

All prey should be killed or at least stunned. This can be accomplished by several methods. If feeding live, I simply swing the rat by the tail and allow its head to "bump" into a step in my garage. Frozen prey is attractive due to the fact that it is on hand when needed, already dead, and usually cheaper than live. Always kill or stun prey, the worst I have ever felt was when I got in a hurry and fed a live rat. He managed to get his teeth on (but thank goodness not in) Sinbad's back. No damage, just a very worried snakekeeper.

Regular use of a vitamin supplement is a must. Your breeder/supplier/vet should be able to recommend something suitable. For those of you with larger collections, bulk supplements from a farm supply store work well. It may cost more than a small bottle at the pet store, but tends to last much longer. Check with a vet as to dosage. Some specimens may regurgitate if handled within a day or two after feeding. I usually avoid handling until the "lump" goes away.

### ■ HOUSING

#### Space

A small tank for starters is OK. I recommend a 20 gallon tank minimum. This will be outgrown very quickly (will last about a year)! A cage amounting to 3/4 square foot per foot of snake is what I consider perfect. Shelves can and should be used to increase floor space and allow somewhere to "go" when active. A shelf also allows a warmer basking site, while forming a cooler area underneath.

#### Temperature

Temperature for a Boa should be kept around 29°C during daytime and 25°C at night. A basking site in the range of 30-35°C is also needed. If temperatures are allowed to stay too cool, refusal of food, regurgitation of prey (very disgusting, if you have never seen/smelled this, consider yourself lucky), digestive problems and respiratory infections will be right behind! Heat should be from heating pads, pig blankets, light bulbs, and NEVER EVER EVER from hot rocks. I have even had success using small ceramic space heaters. The heater should have small enough openings that tails can't enter; an adjustable and covered thermostat, and should shut off if tipped over. These radiate plenty of heat, but do not develop the dangerous surface temperatures regular space heaters tend to have. Remember to monitor temperature very closely. It must also be remembered that the temperature at the bottom can be 10 to 15 degrees lower than that at the top. Be sure the basking area is placed so that a gradient is achieved, with the cool-down area being no lower than 80-85 degrees. The cage should contain a hiding place, a sturdy water bowl big enough for soaking, and something to rub on while shedding (Rocks and tree limbs/sticks work well).

### Substrate

Keep it simple, and do not use Cedar or sand. Newspaper is the easiest. However, an active pet will quickly look as though he has been rolling in charcoal! I use unprinted paper obtained from local newspapers. Many will give this away, but most sell it for a few dollars. Just ask for an end roll.

I have also used indoor/outdoor type carpeting. This is attractive, and relatively inexpensive. Keep a few pieces handy, so that one can be replaced and the other cleaned later. However, carpeting will cut down on the amount of heat obtained from under the tank heating systems. Animal bedding is also attractive and easy to clean, just be sure it does not contain cedar. Aspen is best. Simply remove soiled areas daily, and replace all when cleaning tank.

### Cleaning

Develop and follow a cleaning schedule. Soiled substrate should be removed immediately. Fresh water should be given every few days. Sterilize the water container at each water change. The entire enclosure should be cleaned/sterilized at least bi-weekly. Use a dilute solution of bleach (3-5%) with (optional) 2 teaspoons dishwashing liquid per gallon. Never use Lysol or Pine-sol. These contain chemicals that (by design) leave residues that can kill a pet. Always rinse and dry well before reassembly.

### Lighting

For heat, OK. Full Spectrum, if you really think you must. Not really necessary for a well kept Red-Tailed Boa.

## ■ SLOUGHING

A well fed Boa will slough about once a month. Some

slough less often, maybe every 2 to 3 months. Remember, sloughing is a result of growth, and if your snake does not slough frequently, he is not eating enough. My Boa goes through preslough in about 4 days. This is marked by the clouding over of the eyes. In the end, they will be completely clouded over. At this point, feeding is best postponed till after sloughing is complete. The eyes will clear, and a few days later the skin will be removed. The slough is accomplished by rubbing on something until the skin on the nose comes loose. The skin is then hung on something and pulled off. Check the "head" of the skin and make sure both eyecaps came off. The tail is another area that sometimes will not remove completely. If the skin comes off in lots of small pieces, the humidity is too low. I begin misting mine once a day while in preslough, and 2 to 3 times a day after the eyes clear. He may look at you like you are crazy, but shedding will be much easier. Unshed skin can be removed by soaking in water and then gently pulling it off. Remaining eyecaps are much more difficult to remove. Fortunately, I have never encountered this. I have been told that a long soak, with plenty of underwater time (submerging head at least once every 5 minutes), will loosen them enough to allow removal. Removal can be accomplished by rubbing the eye gently with ball of your thumb. If this does not work, soak again. After soaking and drying, touch a piece of scotch tape to the eyecap and gently pull it away. I would recommend "weakening" the tape by sticking it to the back of your hand at least once before use. My advice, get help, and don't try this at home. Handling should be kept at a minimum during the sloughing period, as the new skin can be sensitive (or even damaged). Feeding should also be postponed for the same reasons, in fact, most will refuse food while sloughing.

## ■ PARASITES AND DISEASES

Snakes can suffer from many ailments - mites and ticks on the skin, worms in the gut, and protozoa, bacteria, or viruses attacking the mouth, skin, and internal organs. New specimens should be quarantined so that they can be checked for parasites and disease. If the snake refuses food for a long period, or if stools are "different", then a stool sample should be taken to a vet for analysis. "Normal" stools will be fairly firm and will normally consist of 2-3 small "chalky" stools to each larger dark stool. These can vary in consistency and colour to some extent. You may also notice small amounts of hair in the stool, this is normal. Watch for extreme looseness, colour changes, and mostly - signs of parasites (worms, eggs, etc.).

Digestive problems are readily treatable, but must be caught early. If constipation is a problem, check temp. If a stool is not passed, and the body begins to swell towards the tail, then a good warm water soak should "clear up" the problem.

Respiratory infections (look for mucous in the mouth, open mouthed breathing, bubbling nostrils) are often cured by simply raising the temp. If not gone in a few days, find a vet, antibiotics are necessary.

Ticks and fleas should not be a problem for snakes. However, if found, they must be removed immediately. Be very careful when removing ticks, an imbedded head can cause a nasty infection. A good cleaning should rid a flea problem.

Mites are another story. They are blood sucking arthropods closely related to ticks. The common snake mite almost always arrives on a snake from a pet store or other infested location. They are VERY small and are hard to see. Putting a two inch square piece of a Shell No-Pest Strip or equivalent (active ingredient = 2,2-dichlorovinyl dimethyl phosphate) in the snake cage

overnight kills the mites.

Put the Strip in a cardboard or plastic container with holes in it. The insecticide can come out, but the snake can't touch the strip. The strip may also be placed on top of a screen top. Don't give water at this time. Afterwards, clean the cage very well. This treatment should be enough if the mite-carrying snake has just arrived. Another very effective treatment is Mite-RX. Use it as directed. If they still persist, I have allowed my snakes to soak in a very weak solution of the Mite-RX. If the mites aren't detected immediately, they spread. The treatment may have to be repeated several times to kill them all. However, I would not soak them in the solution more than twice. Mites, ticks, and fleas can kill a snake!

## ■ SEXING AND BREEDING

A snake's sex can be determined by several methods:

### Neonates

Very often a male neonate can be manually everted by placing one thumb on the ventral side of the tail

*Boa constrictor constrictor*



Photo: P. Schiereck

and rolling it towards the cloaca. The hemipenes will evert easily, but this should only be done by experienced individuals, as damage from excess pressure is possible.

### Probing

This is the most reliable way, but it should only be done by an experienced person. In this method, a metal probe is slipped through the vent to check for the presence of a hemipenes, the male copulatory organ. Every male has two hemipenes in the base of the tail. Females will probe from 2 to 4 subcaudals. Males will probe to 7 to 8 while immature, the adults will probe to 10 to 12 scales.

### Visual inspection

A simple visual examination of the tail's length and thickness. The hemipenes make the tails of males longer and thicker than the tails of females of the same size. When looked at from the side, male tails are generally half as thick at the middle as at the base. Female tails are usually half as thick a quarter of the tail's length from the base. While learning, look at adult snakes of known sex before trying it on juveniles and adults of unknown sex.

### Spurs

Male Boa constrictors have spurs on either side of the vent that are significantly larger than those of the females.

## ■ BREEDING

Breeding Boas requires closely copying their natural conditions. This includes a seasonal day-night light cycle, winter cooling, misting, and many other factors. Timing is crucial. Although captive breeding is

encouraged, it requires more dedication than simply keeping a few snakes.

## ■ FURTHER READING

*As a general guide, I recommend:*

- *de Vosjoli, P. (1990). The General Care and Maintenance of Red-Tailed Boas. This is part of The Herpetocultural Library published by Advanced Vivarium Systems.*
- As a more advanced guide,*
- *Ross, Richard and Marzec, Gerald. Reproductive Husbandry of Pythons and Boas. Institute for Herpetological Research, Stanford.*
- Others have recommended (there are many, but these are the ones I have read):*
- *Conant, R. (1975). A field guide to reptiles and amphibians of eastern and central North America. Peterson Field Guide Series, No. 12. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston. Second ed., 429 pp.*
- *Kauffeld, C. (1969). Snakes: the keeper and the kept. Doubleday, Garden City, New York. 248 pp.*
- *Mattison, C. (1987). The care of reptiles and amphibians in captivity. Blandford Press, New York. Second ed., 317 pp.*
- *Pope, C.H. (1961). The giant snakes—the natural history of the Boa constrictor, the Anaconda, and the largest pythons. A.A. Knopf, New York. Pp XVIII, 290, VII.*