

ADDITIONAL REMARKS ABOUT THE CARE OF RED-TAILED BOAS

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■ INTRODUCTION

An article by Steve Byrd appeared in *Litteratura Serpentiū*, Vol. 16, pp. 39-43, titled 'Care sheet for Red-tailed boas'. From Steve's article I gathered that he is an authority on these animals. I have some minor comments to add to his observations.

I have kept a female red-tailed boa in my possession since September 1990. She is almost seven years old now. Apart from some problems in the beginning, i.e. bloodmites, I have hardly had any problems in keeping this snake. I bought her (against my current principles), from a (reliable) dealer.

To keep my criticisms on the article easy to compare with the original article, I shall give my remarks point by point.

■ SELECTION

As snake lovers we should be convinced by now that obtaining captive-bred animals is the best way to be engaged in the hobby in a responsible way.

■ BEHAVIOUR

With regard to tongue flicking, my boa also flicks its tongue with slow movements whenever it is curious or if it smells something. But it flicks its tongue both

rapidly and long when it smells a prey item. So, no fixed pattern can be detected there.

■ FOOD

In the feeding pattern, changes have occurred regularly in the past five years. During the first year I could offer it four rats one after another, then she would take nothing for three weeks; I never could find any adverse effects. After that the feeding pattern became much more regular but it often refused a second rat, taking another one after a day or two. Presently it is offered one rat a week and that seems adequate for this particular specimen. You can of course find out for yourself what feeding routine is best. If the snake remains restless after one prey item, it is obvious there is need for more. If it immediately goes back into its hiding place you can better forget about another rat or you can find yourself going through a lot of trouble trying to catch the rat again.

That brings me to the point of feeding dead prey items. Why kill a rat yourself (let's be honest, there are nicer things one can do), when a snake can do it in a quick and efficient way? It has indeed sometimes happened that a rat has caught the back of a snake with its teeth, but it has not got the strength to bite when it is being strangled. More likely, a snake can get wounded by the rat's sharp nails during its last spasms, but a wound like that is so small that the snake will not be adversely affected. In this respect I have hardly had any problems

with my animal.

I think it is also unnecessary to administer vitamin supplements. However be sure to offer healthy rats, rats that have had a large dose of vitamins themselves. Often, I give my rats quite a lot of food before I offer them to a snake, hence the food is not fully digested, my boa profits optimally from that.

■ HOUSING

A few years ago I have acquired a terrarium made entirely of glass (100x120x40 cm, l x h x w), with the facility to put a glass partition in the middle, to cater for future breedings. On the right side I have placed two large branches, screwed to planks which cover the floor completely, so they won't topple down due to the snake's weight (this has happened once). The top of the branches reaches 20 cm below two of the four lamps, two halogen lamps of 100 Watt and two plant lamps of 75 watt. After the snake has been fed it will usually lie immediately underneath one of the 100 Watt lamps on the top of one of the branches.

High in the terrarium the temperature ranges between 28°C and 32°C, on the bottom it ranges between 22°C and 25°C. At night everything is turned off and the temperature drops to about 18°C.

The bottom is covered with a 5 cm thick layer of beech shavings, which is ideal. Faeces can be removed locally, so you do not always have to clean the whole terrarium.. There is a small door on both sides of the terrarium so I can reach everything easily. The terrarium is decorated with some artificial plants. The terrarium stands in the living room and because appearances count it is a nice and practical solution, in that way it becomes a beautiful part of the living room. My aversion towards newspaper may be obvious.

The water bowl is relatively small; my boa has never felt the need to lie in the water, but I will discuss humidity later.

■ SLOUGHING

I read it was good to spray some water onto a snake just before the sloughing cycle begins, however that was the cause of a serious problem for my snakes. After I had sprayed my boa it developed lumps filled with fluid, about the size of rather large marbles. The lumps burst after a while and an ugly wound was the result. My veterinary surgeon, Jan Bos, who is at the Ouwehands Animal Zoo as a specialist in, among others, exotic animals, diagnosed a form of herpes. I had to apply 'Terramycin' - an antibiotic ointment - on each individual wound. Many months and sloughs later the skin has healed, but it will take many more sloughs before it will become completely invisible. When I obtained a male last year I made the same mistake again. In an article about breeding with boas I read that the mating response could be increased if you lowered the temperature in the terrarium and sprayed a lot at the same time. However, my newly acquired specimen got the same affliction. So I shall never spray water again to assist either sloughing or to stimulate mating.

■ CONCLUSIONS

Finally, two more small notes: first the control of bloodmites, then the problem of draughts in the terrarium. In the fight against bloodmites I have used anti-moth strips. The amount of dichloorvos is essential in these kinds of treatments and great care should be taken. By excessive use of the strips the respiratory tract of the snake gets irritated: the snake can develop frothy bubbles in the nose, which can develop into pneumonia. Do not use the strip any longer than two hours a day in the terrarium!

After obtaining the male, a captive-bred specimen from Germany bought on the Snake day in 1995, I discovered that it had bloodmites during the quarantine period. The symptoms were dramatic after I had used a Vapona

strip. The snake became ill with lung problems. After a glass strip had broken off from the terrarium, it seemed that both snakes had contracted pneumonia after some time, caused by draughts in the terrarium. The two-year old male didn't survive this double attack, my female did due to the efforts of Jan Bos, my veterinary surgeon. Antibiotics and vitamins seemed to be the salvation. My female is in perfect health again; I will have to look for another male. My resolution to breed remains.

I would like to mention a little book which is of immeasurable value to every lover of boas: Hubert Bosch, 'Boa constrictor', Terrarien Bibliothek, Heselhaus und Schmidt Verlag, ISBN 3-9801853-5-4. You find everything there about keeping and breeding boas (all species), and most important, a list of all possible illnesses that can occur, complete with symptoms, causes and treatment. I recommend this book most highly.

I hope this article may clarify matters for the enthusiast. I had to go through a lot of trouble to find out what I know now. Little is presently being written about the care of boas. That is why I was pleased nevertheless with Steve Byrd's article.

*Translation from Dutch by Astrid Gomes
English corrections by John Weir*