

BITIS NASICORNIS

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Recently we found on the Internet a number of articles that could be used freely. We translated the articles and added information and our own experiences.

REGION OF ORIGIN AND HABITAT

This big viper occurs in Central Africa, from Kenya in the east into Guinea in the west, and from Sudan in the north to Angola in the south. They live in tropical forests, especially in the vicinity of rivers, lakes, swamps and other damp places. *Bitis nasicornis* can be regarded as semi-aquatic.

SIZE AND APPEARANCE

An adult animal reaches a breathtaking size for a member of the viper family but is still smaller than the Gabon viper (*Bitis gabonica*) and the puff adder (*Bitis arietans*). An adult averages about 100 cm long but large females



The result of a Bitis-bite. Photo by John Bakker

can reach up to 150 cm in length. They are regarded as the most beautifully coloured and marked vipers, but some specimens of the East African Gaboon viper (*Bitis gabonica gabonica*) could very well compete for the title 'most beautiful viper of the world'.

The colours provide excellent camouflage on the forest floor where the snakes occur but in a well decorated cage you might also only find them after taking a close look (but not to close, please). In their natural habitat they are very often covered by mud. Of course the colours will not be so very bright when this is the case.

THE POISON

There is little knowledge about the poison of *Bitis nasicornis*, although there are documented bites. Generally the poison should be about the same as that of *Bitis gabonica* but, when delivering a full bite, the dose of poison is often smaller. It is strongly haemotoxic so a bite must always be treated as potentially lethal, even with very young snakes. The lashing-out and the actual bite are delivered so fast that you can miss it by only blinking your eyes! This viper can deliver bites with the same speed and force in all directions, even directly behind itself, so always keep a safe distance between yourself and the snake. The radius within which the snake will hit is surprisingly large, sometimes up to half the body length so a safe distance can be greater than you might suspect. Do not take any risks.

HOUSING

Some authors suggest that, as with *Bitis gabonica*, a terrarium with a floor surface area of at



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least 1.5 times the length of the animal, squared. So a snake of about 1 meter long would need a surface floor of 1.5 by 1.5 meters. In our opinion this is not necessary, keeping in mind that the snakes have a very active lifestyle. Having a cage with the length, times half the length of the animal would be more than enough. Height is not an issue, but *Bitis nasicornis* will sometimes climb a trunk if one is provided. You also need to be able to install heating and lighting in the best way possible. Therefore, the height should be at least 50 cm.

The viper lives in its natural habitat on the dark forest floor, so bright illumination should be avoided. It is better to use a low-powered lamp and add under-floor heating. Temperatures between 24 and 27 degrees Celsius are sufficient in the day and at nights it should be around 19- 20 degrees.

The rhinoceros viper is better adapted to low temperatures than you might expect from a tropical viper. Around 20 degrees daytime temperature the animals keep on feeding, while at 30 degrees or more they become uncomfortable.

The floor can be covered with orchid-bark, wood-chips or sphagnum. A hiding place is also very important to the snake. This can be formed from a box (paper or wood) or just by a simple pile of dead leaves (which can be first sterilised in the micro-wave oven). There should always be fresh water, preferable in a wide, flat bowl. This ensures that the humidity is high enough (85% is better than 60%). As mentioned before, the vipers need shade, therefore we can add, next to the hiding place, plastic plants. The vipers get stressed very quickly if they do not have enough hiding places. The

vipers show this by constantly puffing, and often extensive shaking of the head.

FEEDING AND FAECES

Captive bred *Bitis nasicornis* are often very good eaters and will only stop feeding if no food is offered any more. Newborn animals start with slightly furred baby mice and proceed slowly to bigger mice and then rats. They prefer to eat at night but can be trained in day-time feeding. *Bitis nasicornis* waits for its prey to come within striking range. Than it bites very quickly and powerfully, preferring to strike from the side.

This is probably because they see prey approaching from the side better than from in front. They appear to have some trouble in recognising dead prey, so this should be moved around with a long pair of forceps.

Bitis nasicornis has a extremely long period between feeding and faeces. One male did not produce faeces for three months, while he continued to eat on a regular basis. Overfeeding certainly contributes to this. Therefore it is important to feed the vipers only once every 2-3 weeks. The reason the digestion process is so



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slow is not known, but it is suggested that a combination of little movement and little drinking contributes to this.

Spraying the terrarium and the vipers with lukewarm water starts the animals drinking. This way they drink more than when only provided with a drinking-bowl and it accelerates the digestion process. When the animals produce faeces, you'll have a little more work (due to the amount produced) in cleaning than with other kinds of snakes.

A LAST REMARK

The answer is simple, never obtain snakes which are caught in the wild. *Bitis nasicornis* (along with a lot of other species of venomous snakes) are often caught by using traps made of wire and have severe damage to their neck. Some animals are so damaged that eating and swallowing are no longer practicable and you do not have to be particularly clever to work out that these animals will die a slow death. Even if they wanted to eat it isn't possible anymore. Another reason not to buy wild specimens is that they are often heavily infested with parasites.

CAUGHT IN THE WILD OR CAPTIVE-BRED?

If you ever consider purchasing a *Bitis nasicornis* or other venomous snakes, think again. These animals are not only beautiful, but also very dangerous. When bitten, there is a chance you may not survive. Just using an anti-serum and continue doing whatever that was you were doing only exists in the cinema. And if you are lucky enough to survive a bite, the results are often very dramatic.

Speaking of sera, Reptile-Zoo SERPO in Delft, The Netherlands, is busy putting together a legal serum bank for venomous snake keepers. You will be able to get or replace sera by subscription. If you want to know more, call them.

To continue, does everybody in your neighbourhood want the venomous snakes there? Do you really have the experience to take care of venomous snakes? It seems easy but, when taking care of a sick animal (handling etc.), it still is a nerve-racking and dangerous hobby. Do not count on help, they are *your* snakes....

You often hear people considering keeping cobras or mambas, because they have three months experience with a *Python regius*. AGAIN, we advise against keeping venomous snakes. But if you are determined to undergo this adventure, prepare well! Read, read, read, talk to experienced snake-keepers and visit them at home when possible to see what it really takes to keep venomous snakes.

Translation from Dutch by *Harmen-Jan Platvoet*

