

B REEDING THE BALL PYTHON (*PYTHON REGIUS*, SHAW 1802)

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INTRODUCTION

In 1997 I started keeping snakes. Previously I had kept lizards and read a lot about them. From the moment I started keeping snakes I was fascinated about Ball pythons. Not only because they are one of the strongest and least demanding species of Boidae but also because of their beautiful colouration, manageable size and pleasant character. Of course this species also has some less favourable points. Animals taken from the wild can refuse to eat for

months, some for even up to a year and it is not a very active species, most animals hardly ever leave their hiding place. Currently I have about ten animals in my possession. Among them are a few on breeding loan from the Jungle Corner in Rotterdam. My collection consists of captive-bred and well acclimatised animals.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Python regius is a python species that occurs in Central and West Africa. In shape, length and behaviour it resembles the rare Angola Python (*Python anchietae*). The average length of a male is approximately 110 cm and females often reach a length of 130 cm or more.



Python regius in copula (close-up). Photo Jan Ramaker



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Specimens from populations in the Krobo mountains near Accra, the capital of Ghana, are known to reach a length of 180 cm and are usually darker in colour. Other variations in colour do not appear to be related to a particular region.

HOUSING AND CARE

This species can be kept under relative simple conditions. My terraria are made of plasticised plywood and has sliding glass at the front. The inside of my terraria are white which makes mites etc. easy to spot and therefore quickly treatable.

To cover the floor I use old newspapers or wood shavings. The rest of the cage is furnished with a large flower pot, placed upside down (with the opening at the top) and a shallow wide water bowl. All animals

are housed separately and are only placed together prior to the cooling period. I also keep young animals and males in plastic storage boxes.

Year round the temperature is kept at a constant 28-30°C with one hot spot where the temperature can go up to 40°C. During the night the temperature drops to approximately 23°C. The hiding place is heated to 32°C night and day. Twice a week, about half an hour before the lights go out, I spray every cage generously with water. I noticed that after this the animals often become more active and accept food more readily.

FOOD

Young to half-grown animals are fed once a week. Adult animals are fed every two to three weeks. The

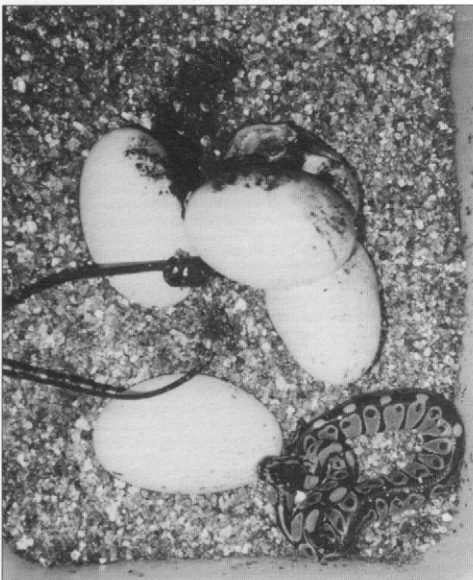


Female 1 Python regius with her eggs. Photo: Jan Ramaker

females get more food than the males to increase fertility in both sexes. Only well fed females will form follicles, lay and, if desired, brood on the eggs. Many of my animals prefer multi-mammate mice, most likely because of their stronger smell. This rodent is often recommended for animals that refuse to eat. Hamsters are also greatly appreciated.

MY ANIMALS

I will describe only my animals that were included in the breeding program. Female 1 I bought on January 17 1998. Immediately she ate everything that was offered. In April 1999 I received Female 2 on a breeding loan from the Jungle Corner. She also ate remarkably well. Male 1 was obtained in October 1998 from someone who, after 9 years, decided that she could no longer provide optimal care for this animal.



Hatching *Python regius*. Photo: Jan Ramaker

BREEDING WITH FEMALE 1

In October 1998 I cooled down the animals to 22°C during the day and 18°C during the night. However, around November 15 I discovered some snake-mites. I therefore decided to raise the temperature back to normal. And because I treated the mite infection with a Vapona cassette the humidity was lower than normal. At the end of December John Bakker advised me to cool the animals again, but in a different manner; the temperature was kept around 33°C during the day but was lowered to 16°C during the night.

On January 2 I noticed that Male 1 and Female 1 were mating this lasted until 2.30 a.m. the next day. After about one month I started to raise the temperature back to normal. Over a period of 3.5 months I noticed another 28 matings between Male 1 and both females that lasted from one hour to over 36 hours and mostly took place at night.

Female 1 however only mated until January 5 when I separated her. From the beginning of February she started to become thicker for the last 2/3 of her body. On March 20 she sloughed. From April 23 she was regularly found lying on her back. On the morning of April 24 she laid six eggs of which one turned out to be not fertilised. The period between mating and the laying of the eggs is therefore at least 4.5 months. I took the eggs away from the female and placed them in vermiculite in an incubator. The temperature inside the incubator was constantly between 30.5 and 32°C. The female remained remarkably calm during the removal of her eggs. The following day she ate two multi-mammate mice.

After about three weeks, on May 16 I removed the unfertilised egg because it became moulded. Another egg also started to mould and was treated with



Hatching detail Python regius. Photo: Jan Ramaker

Norit. After about seven weeks this egg started to shrink a little bit. That was probably a good sign because it could be caused by the embryo. During the night of June 16 to 17 my suspicion was confirmed because a little head appeared from the egg. On June 20 another two neonates hatched. When a few days later I decided to open the remaining two eggs I found two dead young. One was entangled in her umbilical cord and one had two strange bends in her spine. The three other young were all healthy and very aggressive.

The three young were housed separately in small boxes of 20x20x25 cm (l x w x h) containing a water bowl and a small flower bowl turned upside down. During the day the temperature was kept between 28 - 32°C and at night between 22 - 25°C. The relative humidity was around 90%. All young

sloughed after 8 - 10 days at which point I offered them food. They all eagerly ate 'fuzzy' mice and after a couple of weeks changed to small 'jumpers'. At three months old they eat full-grown mice without any difficulty.

BREEDING WITH FEMALE 2

At the end of May Female 2 also became bigger and she sloughed on June 12, 1999. Following this she became restless and began to hiss before I opened her cage. I never saw her lay on her back though. During the night of July 11 she also laid six eggs. I find it remarkable that she is 20 cm longer than Female 1 and laid the same number of similar sized eggs.

I also took away this brood from the female and transferred it to the incubator. This time I incubated the eggs on plastic-coated gauze at a somewhat lower temperature (30 - 31°C). I did this because of the malformations in one of the young from the previous brood, these are often caused by too high temperatures.

Of these six eggs one also proved unfertilised. This egg started to mould after only a few hours and I removed it the next day. After about 60 days the eggs started to dent a little. Three days later none of the eggs were stuck together anymore and a day later little droplets started to appear on the eggs. On September 16, after 66 days the first three neonates stuck their heads out of the eggs. The next day the other two followed. The neonates stayed in their eggs for one day before emerging fully. These neonates were housed separately and treated identically to the young from the first brood. They sloughed after about 10 days and then accepted fuzzy mice. Remarkably they were much less aggressive than the young from the first brood.

CONCLUSION

The result is a total of eight young from two broods. It is not clear if the result of the second clutch is due to the lower incubation temperature of the gauze system. It is clear however, that it is not too difficult to obtain good breeding results with this species. It is however important to start with 'good' animals and to bring them in an optimal condition before a breeding attempt is initiated.

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