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Ball Python Care

INTRODUCTION

Ball pythons are native to central and western Africa. They are very popular pets due to their small size and their shy, but friendly and docile nature. Ball pythons get their name from their tendency to curl themselves up into a tight ball when scared. They come in an array of colors and patterns. They reach about 4-5 feet in length and their average lifespan in captivity is 20-30 years.

HOUSING

Cage – Select an enclosure designed for snakes as snakes, especially ball pythons, are great escape artists. A glass tank with a mesh screen top is a common enclosure. A 10 gallon tank is appropriate for hatchlings. Adult ball pythons may require up to a 30 gallon tank.

Bedding – Newspapers, butcher paper, or paper towels are common tank liners as they are easy to replace. Vinyl tile, Repti-Carpet, or Astroturf can also be used. Paper products such as Carefresh can also be used if your snake likes to burrow. The bedding or substrate should be replaced or cleaned at least once a week. Wood shavings, sand, gravel, mulch, and other natural substrates should not be used due to difficulty of cleaning, risk of gastrointestinal problems if consumed, and irritation to the eyes, mouth, and respiratory system.

Hide/Humidity Box – A hide box and a separate humidity box should be provided on the warm side of the enclosure. Ball pythons like to sleep in a dark snug enclosure. Half-logs (found at pet stores), cardboard boxes, or upside-down opaque plastic containers can be used. Make sure the hide box is large enough to fit the entire snake. Humidity boxes are great for snakes that have a hard time shedding properly. Humidity boxes can be made from a plastic Tupperware type container with a hole cut in one side for your snake to enter. Make sure the cut edges are smooth. Damp sphagnum moss or a damp piece of foam/sponge can be placed in the container. The moss/foam/sponge can be rewet daily or as needed. The humidity box should be cleaned every two weeks and the moss replaced or the foam/sponge washed to prevent mold growth and waste build-up.

Care Furniture – Furniture such as large rocks, branches, and driftwood can be used in the environment. Make sure all items are easy to clean. Do NOT use heated rocks due to risk of thermal burns. Changing the layout of the cage furniture intermittently can provide enrichment for your snake.

Temperature – The enclosure should be large enough to have a warm side and a cool side to allow your ball python to regulate its temperature by changing its location. The correct temperature is important for your ball python to be able to digest its food. Digital thermometers rather than dial thermometers should be used for accuracy. The probe of the digital thermometer should be placed at the level of the animal rather than at the top of the enclosure. At least two thermometers should be used, one to measure the cool side and one the warm side. The warm side should reach up to 90°F and the cooler side should be about 80-85°F. A red bulb, ceramic heating elements, or reptile under tank heating pads are often used as a heat source. Do NOT use heated rocks as ball pythons are very susceptible to thermal burns.

Humidity – Ball pythons are native to hot dry areas in Africa. The humidity only needs to be around 50% normally and increased to 60-65% during shedding. Enclosures that are too high in humidity/damp can lead to skin blisters.

Lighting – Ball pythons are nocturnal and do not require a UV light source.

Cagemates – Ball pythons should generally be housed alone.

FEEDING

Prey – Your ball python should be fed whole prey items (mice, rats, etc.). Frozen or pre-killed prey is highly recommended because live rodents can bite and seriously injure your ball python. Juveniles should be fed ONCE A WEEK until they mature. Then they should be fed ONCE EVERY OTHER WEEK. Offer prey no larger than the widest part of your snake. Multiple prey items can be offered at a single feeding. Your snake will not eat while in shed.

Handling – Excessive handling after feeding can cause your snake to regurgitate. Try not to disturb your snake for 4 days after feeding.

WATER

Water bowl – The water bowl should be large enough for your snake to curl up in. Provide clean, fresh water daily on the cool side of the enclosure.

Soaking – Soak your ball python 1-2 times a week in a warm bath for 15-20 minutes. This encourages drinking, helps improve hydration, and helps with shedding. When your snake is shedding, increase the soaking to once a day. Make sure the depth of the bath is no deeper than the widest part of your snake to decrease the risk of drowning.

Misting – Mist your ball python's enclosure daily during shedding to help increase the humidity in the environment. Otherwise misting the enclosure 1-2 times a week is sufficient.

HANDLING

You should always use both hands to pick up your snake and make sure to support most of the body. Be gentle and avoid sudden movements. If your snake wraps around something, you can unwind it by gently gasping its tail and unwrapping it.

Salmonellosis – Reptiles are commonly carriers of Salmonella and are a potential source of infection to humans. We recommend washing your hands immediately after handling your snake or after coming into contact with fecal material.

HEALTH CARE

We recommend a complete physical exam and fecal by an exotic animal veterinarian for all newly acquired pet ball pythons. Thereafter, we recommend exams every 6 months and fecal exams every 12 months.

Shedding – All snakes need to shed to grow. Juvenile snakes can shed monthly whereas mature pythons tend to shed about 2-4 times a year. Your snake is getting ready to shed when its eye take on a blue-gray color and their scales appear dull. Cage furniture such as branches should be provided to help the snake loosen its shed.

COMMON MEDICAL PROBLEMS

Retained Shed – Unlike lizards that shed in patches, snakes should shed in one entire piece. If your snake is having trouble shedding, a humidity box and daily soaking should be provided. DO NOT try to pull the retained shed off (especially the eye spectacles) and this can cause injury to the underlying tissue. If they continue to have trouble shedding, please contact your veterinarian.

Frequent Shedding – Mature snakes should only shed 2-4 times a year. If they are shedding frequently, there is an underlying problem and should be seen by a veterinarian.

Mites – Mites can be seen on snakes living in less than ideal conditions. These mites are tiny reddish brown dots that move around your snake's body or cluster around the eyes.

Upper Respiratory Infection – Respiratory infections are often due to suboptimal husbandry. Signs include lethargy, nasal discharge/bubbling, congestion, open mouth breathing, bubbly/stringy oral mucous, and weight loss. Please contact your veterinarian if you notice these signs.

Inclusion Body Disease – This is an infectious disease seen in pythons and boas and is usually fatal, especially in pythons. Neurologic signs (paralysis, unable to right itself when turned over, star-gazing, and weakness) are most common, but chronic regurgitation, respiratory infections, extreme weight loss, and shedding problems can be seen as well. Diagnosis is very difficult. All new snakes should be quarantined as IBD may take several months to manifest. Make sure to wash your hands thoroughly after handling new snakes.