



Royal Pythons - Python regius

Royal (or sometimes known as Ball) pythons are a good starter species for many people. They can be resilient to a variety of conditions; however, it is all keepers' duty to provide the best care possible. We outline various ways of providing their basic needs and some hints and tips on making their lives as enriched, healthy and long lived as possible. This guide splits their care requirements into six main categories – heating, lighting, diet, substrates, hides and to begin with, housing. As it's important to consider any species wild natural history, in particular their biotope we have included a section so that the keeper can make an informed decision on the care they provide.

Housing

This species has been known, in hobby circles, as a floor dweller mainly living in and around terrestrial burrows – the typical being the ant hills found in their natural terrain. However, much work has come to light that indicates this species is, in part, are also arboreal living – there may even be differences between climbing habits with males being more likely to climb than females. For this reason, we recommend a taller vivarium that normally associated with this species – at least 60cm tall (for an adult) with a recommendation of around 100cm plus being the optimum. Branches should be provided to allow climbing, and hides can be arboreal or terrestrial – with a recommendation that both are provided. A minimum

of 120cm wide by 60cm depth is currently considered the optimum vivarium size, however at this size please provides lots of hiding choices. Babies and youngsters should be scaled appropriately in their housing. There are many styles of vivarium, and many materials they can be made from plastic, fibreglass and melamine all have their bonuses and their negatives.

Heating

There are many relationships with the choice of heat source and lighting. This is due to the wild conditions – the sun provides both. We must keep this in mind when choosing a heat source. In the wild the sun heats the ground during the day; this will provide a source of belly heat during the evening when the sun goes down. However, in the wild this species does sometimes bask in the sun, especially during the cooler months of the year (the extreme daytime temperatures during the summer dictates a more crepuscular behaviour). For these reasons, we prefer to use a ceramic heater, controlled by a thermostat for this species. It will provide an overhead heat source and also, if required, a belly heat source as it will heat any item underneath – some keepers place a rock under the heater to facilitate this. A more traditional source of under floor heating such as a heat mat is not recommended for adults of this species. This can cause a condition that affects the underbelly scales – starting as pink patches but often leading to infection and necrotic dermatitis. A method of controlling the temperature must be used; a good quality thermostat (we highly recommend the Microclimate range) should maintain a temperature of around 32°C during the day, down by around 10°C during the night. A temperature gradient must be provided allowing the snake to escape from these temperatures to cooler areas.

Lighting

This is an area of husbandry where there is conflict of opinion, some keepers do not provide UVB lighting (or indeed any form of lighting) and feel confident that there are no benefits to health – and also it maintains a healthy feeding response by not adding this “unnatural” vivarium addition. Others feel that lighting is vital to the general well being of the snake with a regular photo period and some feel that UVB lighting also maintains a healthy snake. If the keeper chooses a UVB light it must be one of the lower form T8 tubes, something around 5-6% and mounted around 30cm from the reptile. We recommend both Arcadia and ZooMed UVB lighting. Some keepers also prefer to provide a UVB gradient much like the temperature gradient already discussed earlier. UVB may provide

acceptable levels of vitamin D3 for captive Royal Pythons. The bright light may be a problem for this species, so if you provide a UVB, you must provide many sufficiently deep dark hides that allow the reptile to escape the light. Provide a photoperiod of at least 12 hours day to 12 hours night – this can be altered seasonally if a very natural pattern is preferred.

Substrates

Many forms of ground covering substrate have been tried for this species. Many keepers prefer to provide a more natural choice of a sand / soil based loose substrate, others prefer aspen or even newspaper. All have their good and bad points – but it's fair to say that the worry of gut impaction is a topic that is fearlessly debated. We have used all methods over the years and recommend ProRep Bark Chips. For further reading see our advanced section on using various substrates.

Hides

Hides must be provided. Commercial hides are available and the keepers can provide homemade deeper hides - this allows the reptile to regulate their exposure and choose the light level they prefer. There are many products that help with homemade hides such as Zoo Med Excavator Clay; we will add further guides in using these kinds of products in our advanced section. It's important to remember that varying degrees of humidity will be required. In simpler set ups, with commercially available, there are products that lend themselves to humid hides such as Exo Terras Snake Cave. Once these are packed with a moist substrate (moss is ideal) they will maintain a local high level of humidity. Of course dry hides must also be provided – again there are many to choose from. If the more advanced method appeals please take a look at our guide to creating more natural humidity creating hides.

Diet

In the wild it is known that Royal pythons eat a variety of grassland small mammals such as gerbils, shrews, cane rats, Nile rats, jerboas and jirds. They are also known to eat birds, there has been work done that suggests males are more prone to eating birds than females – presumably due to their climbing activities. It has also been noted that lizards are also eaten, especially by youngsters. The natural seasons force the python to have long periods of inactivity when food is scarce, this is during the hot dry spells – and is often the reason given for the long spells sometimes exhibited by captive Royals for not feeding. Some keepers supplement the foods, but

most agree this is not a requirement – certainly we do not here at Coast to Coast Exotics.

Biotope

A good starting point is where this species occurs in the wild – it occurs in territories in and around Sub-Saharan Africa, from Senegal on the west coast northeast through Mali to western Sudan and southeast through Guinea-Bissau to the Gulf of Guinea, then east to the Central African republic, possibly Zaire, Uganda, and has been recorded in Niger, Chad, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Benin and Cameroon. Most captive populations originate from Ghana or Togo.

This species can become inactive during long periods of dry, hot weather. Temperatures can be 40C plus, but of course where the pythons are hidden will be much cooler. Humidity in the open air is low at around 20-30%, but in their burrows can be quite consistently higher at 50-60% and even seasonally higher in those regions experiencing a rainy season.

Habitat is varied depending on (amongst other things) geographical region and human activity. They are often found in very arid regions including grasslands, farm lands, savannahs, partially forested areas and around human habitation – attracted by rodent populations. They will take advantage of a number of hiding opportunities in hollowed trees, logs, mammal burrows and of course termite and ant nests.

This care sheet was kindly provided by Kevin Stevens of Coast to Coast Exotics.

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