

Ball Python (*Python regius*) Basic Husbandry and Feeding: Housing, Diet, Handling, and Care

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Ball Pythons (*Python regius*) are snakes which are well-tempered and fairly easy to maintain. They may also be referred to as "Royal Pythons," or "Regal Pythons." Domestically captive-bred specimens from reputable breeders are available, and much preferred over wild-caught snakes.

Natural environment

The natural range of the Ball Python is western Africa to central Africa, just north of the equator. It can be found in open forests, as well as drier savannahs. It is usually found in areas with good cover near open water where it can cool itself during hot weather, since temperatures often exceed 100°F. It spends most of its time on or under the ground in confiscated burrows, although it can climb. It is crepuscular (most active at dawn and at dusk).



Physical characteristics

Like other snakes, it has a highly sensitive forked tongue which is used as a sensory organ.

Subspecies differences: There are no recognized subspecies of the Ball Python, although colors and patterns may differ from region to region.

Sexual differences: The female Ball Python is larger than the male, and can reach a length of up to 6 feet, although 4 feet is more common. Ball Pythons have very muscular bodies, which can be 4-6 inches in diameter; the male is generally more slender and has a smaller head. Both female and male snakes have "anal spurs," which look like small claws on either side of the vent. These are actually vestigial hind legs. Male snakes have larger anal spurs. A sexing probe can be used to determine the sex of snakes less than 6 months of age, but it should only be done by someone proficient in its use. Young Ball Pythons grow about one foot in length for their first 3 years, and reach sexual maturity at 3-5 years of age.

Color: Since it is secretive, the Ball Python has a camouflaged design in browns and tans. The top of the head is characteristically a dark brown, and has yellowish stripes on each side from the nostrils, through the eyes, and to the back of the head. The underside of the snake is ivory white.

Life expectancy: Ball Pythons generally live 10 years in the wild, and often 20-30 years in captivity (the record is 47 years).

Temperament

The Ball Python is generally well-mannered, and will seldom bite, instead, if threatened, it rolls itself into a ball (hence the name Ball Python) with the head buried beneath the folds of its body. It may share a burrow peacefully with others of its kind.

Handling

Ball Pythons are generally docile and easy to handle, making it a good choice for herp hobbyists. They should be handled frequently to keep them comfortable with the process. Large snakes should be picked up with one hand placed at about 1/3 the length of the snake, and the other at 2/3's. The body of the snake should be supported by your arms or other parts of the body.

Housing

Cages: When choosing a cage for a Ball Python, remember how big it will eventually become. Either a large cage should be selected, or the decision made to purchase larger cages as the animal grows. Young pythons may be kept in (dry) 10-20 gallon aquariums. After they reach 3 feet in size, a larger terrarium with a glass/acrylic front may be more appropriate. A general rule of thumb is that the perimeter of the cage (2 times the width plus 2 times the length) should be equal to at least 2 times the length of the snake. For example, a 5-foot snake would need a cage with a perimeter of at least 10 feet, e.g.; a 3' x 2' cage.

Snakes are excellent escape artists, so any cage should have a tight-fitting lid/door, preferably with a lock. The lid and/or other panels should be made of wire mesh to allow for good ventilation. Cypress mulch, paper towels, and newspapers provide a good substrate, as does Astroturf. Have one or two spare pieces available to use when the cage is being cleaned. Do NOT use shavings.

Cage furnishings: There must be a hide box in the cage, into which the snake can comfortably retreat, such as a hollow log. An excellent hide box is made from a favorite wide terra cotta flower pot. Enlarge the drain hole with a chisel and file it to remove any sharp edges, and place the pot in the cage, drain hole side up. The snake will often spend most of the daylight hours in the hide box.

Heat: The temperature should generally be around 80-85°F during the day, with a basking area that reaches 90°F. The temperature should be cooler at night, 69-75°F. It is important that you maintain this day/night cycle. The supplemental heat can be provided through under-cage heating mats, and overhead ceramic heaters. During the day, incandescent light bulbs of 75 watts or lower, with reflectors, provide the higher temperature for basking, and should be placed at one end of the cage to

set up a heat gradient. Sturdy wooden branches should be supplied so the snake can choose how close to the heat source it wants to be (but not so close it could burn itself). The branches will also aid the snake during its shed. Do NOT use heat rocks. If necessary, an infrared bulb or room heater may be used to maintain the proper temperature at night.

Measure the temperature in several areas of the cage both during the day and at night using a quality thermometer, to assure you have the proper temperature gradient. Measure the temperature both under the basking light and near the floor of the cage. Providing a temperature gradient is crucial, and allows the snake to choose the temperature it prefers. To maintain the proper temperature, it is best to have thermostats connected to the heat sources. The cage should be placed away from drafts or appliances which may put off heat. Remember to never place a glass cage in the direct sun.

Light: "Day-light" or "full-spectrum" fluorescent lights will provide good lighting during the day. Unlike some reptiles, full spectrum lighting is not required, though it still is recommended. The snake should have a photoperiod of 12 hours of light and 12 hours of darkness. The light can be slowly increased by 2 hours in the summer, and decreased by 2 hours in the winter. Using a timer on the light will provide better control.

Water and humidity

A fresh pool of water should be available so the snake can immerse itself when it chooses. The container should be heavy so the snake can not knock it over. The water temperature should be between 72-79°F, and any water which is added should be at that temperature. Snakes often defecate in the water, so it should be checked and changed daily. Enclosures should be kept at approximately 50% humidity and increased to 65-75% humidity at the time of shedding.

Misting is generally not needed nor recommended, however, if the humidity is extremely low, a daily misting will provide the higher humidity that aids in proper shedding. Ball Pythons should not be kept in a damp environment since this can lead to skin infections and other problems.

Diet

Ball Pythons are carnivores, and kill their prey by constricting it. Younger, smaller snakes can be fed baby mice. Larger snakes are fed adult mice, rats, or young chickens. All of these should be pre-killed and are available frozen; be sure to buy them from a reputable source. They should be allowed to thaw (not heated) before they are given. Avoid live prey since they can cause severe bite wounds on snakes, and these often become infected if not treated promptly and properly. After feeding, it is very important that the cage temperature be within acceptable limits for proper digestion.

How often the snake is fed varies with its age, the environmental temperature, reproductive state, the size of the prey, and the activity level of the snake. Younger snakes are fed more often - once or twice a week; large snakes may be fed once every 1-2 weeks. In the winter, or if the environmental temperature is low, the snake will eat less or maybe not at all for several weeks. Females incubating a clutch of eggs will normally not eat until the eggs hatch. Snakes who are in the process of [ecdysis \(shedding\)](#) will generally not eat. Ball Pythons can be prone to obesity, so do not overfeed. Feed the Ball Python during the evening or at dusk.

Reproduction

Much has been written on breeding snakes. Before attempting to breed Ball Pythons, read as many in-depth sources as you can. It is a money and time commitment, which should be entered into after much thought and research. Important points to know: the sexes should be separated for several weeks prior to mating, and kept at cooler temperatures at night (68°F). The eggs, generally 4 to 7 in number, are laid about a month after breeding. The eggs are easily damaged. The mother will incubate the eggs. If necessary, they can be incubated in a separate cage at around 84-90°F, at high humidity (90-100%), although some recommend incubating at 65-75% humidity and increasing it to almost 100% several days before the expected hatching. Eggs usually hatch in 60 days. Hatchlings often need to be force fed.