Caring for Boa Constrictors

Among reptile hobbyists, boa constrictors are popular because of their large size yet relatively gentle nature. Although they are large, they are modest in size compared with snakes such as Burmese and reticulated pythons. As pets, boa constrictors can be a good choice for people who already have experience caring for reptiles. This species requires long-term commitment and responsibility, and larger specimens can be a challenge to house properly. In some locations, a permit is required to own a snake that has reached a certain length (e.g., 6 feet). Check your city or state’s animal control regulations for special rules regarding large snakes.

Biological Facts
- The common name and the scientific name of this species are the same: Boa constrictor.
- Some people mistakenly call boa constrictors red-tailed boas; this name only applies to a South American subspecies, Boa constrictor constrictor.
- Boa constrictors are nonvenomous.
- They may live up to 20 to 30 years (ages of up to 40 years have been reported).
- A typical maximum size is 6 to 10 feet in length, although 12 to 14 feet is possible.
- Females are generally larger than males.
- Large specimens may weigh as much as 50 to 60 pounds.
- Boa constrictors can sense prey with the aid of heat-sensitive cells in their lips, although they lack the labial pits surrounding these receptors seen in many other boas and pythons.

Behavior
- Nocturnal, prefer to hunt at night
- Terrestrial and arboreal
- Solitary, except to breed
- Usually docile

Diet
- A boa constrictor’s natural diet consists of rodents, birds, bats, lizards, and amphibians.

Environment
- A boa constrictor’s natural environment ranges from tropical rainforest to arid semi-desert;

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- In captivity, juvenile boa constrictors are typically fed mice and adults are usually fed rats and/or chicks; larger specimens may consume larger prey items like rabbits or guinea pigs.
- Pre-killed prey items are preferred because they can be purchased in bulk, are easy to store, and are generally less expensive to obtain. Frozen prey items should be fed within 3 to 6 months of purchase. Frozen prey items should be thawed slowly overnight in a sealed container (do not place items directly in water) in the refrigerator. Frozen prey items should not be thawed in the microwave or in warm/hot water.
- Feeding your snake live rodents should be avoided if possible. Live prey animals may bite or scratch in defense, resulting in injuries that could lead to infection or even the death of the snake. Additionally, if the snake does not kill and consume a mouse or rat, the rodent may feed on the snake.
- If the snake refuses to eat pre-killed prey items, consult a veterinarian to develop a transition strategy from live to pre-killed prey items.
- If you give your snake a live prey animal, never leave it unsupervised with the prey for more than a few minutes. Confirm that the snake has apprehended and killed the prey before leaving the snake unattended.
- Provide your snake with fresh water every day. Use a bowl or pan large enough for the snake to climb into and soak.
however, most subspecies thrive when maintained in a warm, humid cage.

- Glass terrariums are commonly used as enclosures for boa constrictors. A wide variety of suitable melamine and insulated plastic cages are also available. Any enclosure should be clean, free of sharp edges or points, and well ventilated. Ideally, a snake should have enough room to stretch out inside its cage; it should at least have adequate room to move around.
- To reduce stress, the cage should contain a “hide box” or other refuge that the snake can retreat into or under. You should be able to remove the snake from the hide box if necessary.
- Newspaper and indoor/outdoor carpeting (sold as reptile carpet) are highly recommended as cage substrates. Cypress mulch or aspen shavings can be used when additional moisture is desired, but they are harder to keep clean and may be accidentally ingested during feeding. Cedar and pine shavings are irritating to the respiratory tract and should be avoided.
- There must be a temperature gradient in the cage to allow the snake to thermoregulate between warmer and cooler areas. During the day, the temperature range in the cage should be 85°F to 90°F (29°C to 32°C); a heat source (ceramic heat emitter or heat lamp) should be placed above the warm end of the cage to provide a “basking area” that reaches 90°F to 95°F (32°C to 35°C). Nighttime temperatures should be 75°F to 80°F (24°C to 27°C).
- A digital thermometer probe is the best way to check cage temperatures. The small plastic disc and adhesive thermometers often sold by pet stores are less reliable. Thermometers should be placed on both the cool and warm sides of the cage to help ensure an appropriate temperature gradient.
- Avoid heat rocks or heat sources of any kind that can come into direct contact with the snake, as these often cause severe burns.
- Under-the-tank heating pads made specifically for reptile enclosures can be used, but there should always be a layer of substrate between the animal and the bottom of the cage to avoid burns. When using a heating pad, a rheostat is recommended for added safety.
- Humidity should be maintained at 50% to 60% through regular misting of the cage, covering a portion of the cage top, and providing a hiding box with moist paper towels or sphagnum moss. Boa constrictors should be allowed to soak in water (in the cage or in a bathtub) two or three times weekly. A hygrometer should be placed inside the cage to monitor humidity.
- A rough object, such as a natural or artificial rock or log, should be provided to help the snake shed its skin properly. A snake should shed its skin in a single piece, and there should always be an “eye cap” (also called spectacle) over each eye spot on the shed skin. If no eye cap is present on the shed skin, the snake may have a retained spectacle. Consult your veterinarian if you think this is the case with your snake.

Preventive Care

- Boa constrictors should have a comprehensive physical examination every 6 to 12 months.
- Blood work is often recommended at each health check.
- Annual fecal examination for internal parasites may be recommended (especially for snakes that are fed live prey).
- Tick and mite infestations are best treated by a veterinarian who specializes in caring for reptiles and other exotic pets.
- Consult a veterinarian with experience treating reptiles if you have any questions or concerns about your snake’s health.

Common Medical Disorders

- Respiratory infection (pneumonia)
- Stomatitis (“mouth rot”)
- Prey-induced trauma
- Burns
- Anorexia
- Parasites (internal and external)
- Problems shedding