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African Egg Eating Snakes (*Dasypeltis* sp.)

EGG-centric Egg Eaters!

The African egg eating snakes comprise of approximately 10 to 13 species of small, terrestrial to semi-arboreal colubrid snakes found throughout much of Africa depending upon the species. As their common names imply, the most well-known behaviors of these snakes are their tendency to be almost exclusively egg eaters, often climbing into shrubbery and trees in search of freshly laid bird and reptile eggs. Unlike most other snakes, egg eating snakes lack teeth, and instead possess three to four bony projections located on the inside of their mouths and throats that puncture and crack eggs once ingested far enough using muscular contractions. These snakes then feed on and digest the egg's soft embryonic fluids and other liquids, and then finally regurgitating a completely crushed egg shell. Egg eating snakes also appear and behave very similarly to venomous vipers that overlap in their native ranges, such as the carpet or saw scale vipers (*Echis* sp.), and when threatened, will saw scale by rubbing the serrated and keeled scales together along their coils while flattening or triangulating their heads. African egg eating snakes can be quite variable in coloration and patterning depending on the species and locality, and can vary from light or dark brown, olive green, reddish-brown or orange, to grayish, to yellowish or yellowish brown with darker alternating cross-banding, barring, or blotches. Their heads are fairly short and rounded, and eyes large with elliptical pupils. Of the species, the Rhombic Egg Eating Snake (*D. scabera*) and the East African Egg Eating Snake (*D. medici*) are perhaps the most commonly imported and kept species.

Taxonomy

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum/Sub Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Serpentes

Infraorder: Alethinophidia

Family: Colubridae

Genus: *Dasypeltis*

Species: *Dasypeltis* sp.*

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Lifespan and Longevity

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If provided the proper care, African egg eating snakes are hardy snakes that can attain potential longevity of at least 10 to 15 years or more. Other than their specialized dietary requirements, egg eating snakes for the most part have similar care and husbandry requirements as other small colubrid species found in the pet trade, such as African house snakes.

Distribution and Habitat

Consisting of about 13 species, African egg eating snakes range throughout most of Africa, with their exact range depending to a large extent on the particular species and subspecies. African egg eating snakes may be found in a variety of habitats ranging from arid to semi-arid deserts and scrublands, savannahs, grasslands, coastal regions, to human habitations, as well as tropical to sub-tropical forests and woodlands.

Conservation Status

IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC).

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

African egg eating snakes are sexually dimorphic species, with males being smaller than females. Males can range from 12 to 18 inches, or 1 to 1 ½ feet on average, while females may reach 24 to 40 inches, or 2 to roughly 4 feet in size.

Housing and Enclosure

Housing must be sealed, secure, and escape proof. Hatchling and juvenile egg eating snakes can be housed in a 10 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adult egg eating snakes should be housed in a minimum of a 20 to 40 gallon long terrarium or enclosure. Egg eating snakes are primarily terrestrial, and floor space is more important than height. Provide a substrate that can enable burrowing or hiding such as cage carpet or cage liner, fine aspen shavings, cypress mulch, or coconut fibers. Do not use pine or cedar shavings, as these substrates are toxic to snakes. Provide additional basking and hiding opportunities using live or artificial foliage, rocks, logs, driftwood, or other hides. Also be sure to include a sturdy water bowl or dish as well.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

Create a thermal gradient (or a warm side) in the cage/enclosure with an appropriate sized UTH (or tank heating pad), ceramic or radiant heat emitter, or incandescent, UVA/UVB, or other heat producing bulb. Ideal temperatures for egg eating snakes range from 75 to 80 degrees F on the cool side and 80 to 90 degrees F on the warm side. Most species of snakes have fairly simple and undemanding heating and lighting requirements in captivity, and do not require additional UVA/UVB lighting, although providing it can be greatly beneficial for their health, immune system, and overall wellness. Also be sure to spot clean the enclosure for urates, feces, or uneaten food at least once per week. Be sure to periodically replace the substrate, clean, and disinfect the enclosure and its furnishings at minimum every 2 to 3 months. More specific lighting, heating, and humidity product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Carnivorous; In the wild, egg eating snakes are one of only two groups and genera of snakes that consume almost exclusively bird and reptile eggs in the manner described above. Other prey items are rarely consumed, but may include frogs and other amphibians, smaller reptiles, and insects/other invertebrates. Feeding these species in captivity is certainly one of the most prominent challenges to maintaining egg eating snakes. However, store purchased or

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commercially available eggs can be acquired to feed egg eating snakes. Some of these can include eggs from pigeons, Coturnix quail, doves, button quail, or finches depending on the age and size of the snake. Most egg eating snakes are not large enough to consume standard chicken eggs. Generally, Coturnix quail eggs are the easiest to obtain, and can be inexpensively purchased from any Asian or local ethnic food stores, agricultural feed stores, or local bird breeders in one's area. Smaller eggs, such as those from button quail and finches can be used for smaller snakes. These may be less readily available to obtain, but can still be located through local pet stores, bird breeders, or other similar sources. Alternatively, these eggs can be ordered online if local sources for these eggs are unavailable. Most egg eating snakes can be fed once to twice weekly using appropriately sized eggs, and any uneaten eggs, and regurgitated shells should be cleaned and removed periodically. Most of these eggs can also be refrigerated, and egg eating snakes do not require any additional dietary supplementation as a result of their specialized diets. More specific dietary and supplementary product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

Handling

African egg eating snakes are still infrequently bred in captivity, and information on the temperament and dispositions of hatchlings and juveniles is sparse. However, as with many snakes, hatchling and juvenile egg eating snakes typically are initially be nervous and defensive. When threatened, African egg eating snakes may flatten and triangulate their heads and necks, and perform a saw scaling action by rubbing their keeled ridges of their scales across one another over their coils. As these species lack teeth, they are unlikely to bite in self-defense, however. Egg eaters in captivity are often said to be nervous and intolerant of frequent handling, although other sources indicate that with gentle, deliberate handling, egg eaters will tolerate being handled in similar fashion to other smaller pet trade species of colubrid snakes.

****Also be sure to practice basic cleanliness and hygiene associated with proper husbandry after touching or handling any animals or animal enclosures to prevent the possibility of contracting salmonellosis or any other zoonotic pathogens****

Contact

Authored by Eric Roscoe. For any additional questions, comments, and/or concerns regarding this animal, group of animals, or this care sheet, please email and contact the Madison Area Herpetological Society at info@madisonherps.org

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