



*Matthew Nauman

Ball or Royal Python (*Python regius*)

A Small, Popular Mainstay from Africa

Also known as Royal pythons, ball pythons are a small python species which earn their name from their habit of coiling into a tight ball with their head in the center when threatened or attacked. Ball pythons are a small, very heavy bodied python with a black to dark brown ground color and large, light brown to yellowish brown loaf shaped dorsal and lateral blotches. As with the similarly related Angolan python (*Python anchietae*), ball pythons are nocturnal and crepuscular, and are also largely fossorial, spending much of their time underground in burrows or termite mounds constructed by other animals. Hundreds of color and pattern cultivars or morphs of ball pythons are kept and bred in captivity including albinos, spiders, pinstripes, pastels, enchis, genetic stripes, and many others to name only a few of the base morphs.

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: Pythonidae

Genus: Python

Species: *Python regius**

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, ball pythons can attain longevity of at least 20 to 25 years or more. Up to 40 years is not unheard of as well.

Distribution and Habitat

Ball pythons occur in the savannahs and grasslands of western and central Africa. More specifically, they range from Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Ghana, and Nigeria to Cameroon, to the Central African Republic and Sudan.

Conservation Status

IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC).

Experience Level

Novice/Beginner to Intermediate/Moderate (depending on origin).

Size

Ball, or royal pythons range from 8 to 12 inches as hatchlings, and 3 to 5 feet, or 36 to 54 inches as most adults.

Housing and Enclosure

Housing must be sealed, secure, and escape proof. Hatchling ball pythons can be housed in a 10 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adult ball pythons should be housed in a minimum of a 40 gallon long terrarium or enclosure. Ball pythons 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 ball pythons range from 75 to 82 degrees F on the cool side and 85 to 92 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, ball pythons are carnivorous, and will prey upon rodents and other small mammals, small birds, and other smaller vertebrates. In captivity, ball pythons can be given feeder rodents of appropriate size, such as rats or mice. In most circumstances, it is recommended to provide humanely pre-killed rodents acquired from a reputable source, as offering live rodents to any snake can carry risk of serious injury or even death to your snake when the rodent bites to defend itself or otherwise gnaws on your animal. A general rule of thumb when selecting feeder rodent sizes for your snake is to provide prey items that are approximately the same width as the snake's widest point. It should also be noted that many snakes may refuse food for longer periods of time over several weeks or months, especially in the fall and winter months or if several other husbandry conditions are not being met. While this can be alarming to new pet owners, it is oftentimes normal, but their overall health and weight should be monitored during these times to make sure they do not lose weight or otherwise deteriorate. Most snakes typically are fed whole prey items, and do not usually require additional calcium or vitamin D3 supplementation unless otherwise directed. Their feeding frequency will also depend on the age, size, and overall health of your animal. Use care as to not overfeed them, as obesity and other health related issues can become an issue. More specific dietary and supplementary product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well

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Handling

As with many snakes, hatchling and juvenile ball pythons may initially be nervous and defensive. Ball pythons will initially "ball up", or less frequently, bite if frightened. Handle your ball python gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal. Most ball pythons will become more tolerant and accustomed to handling as they become older.

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

Disclaimer: Note that the information provided in these, or any care sheets, are not intended to be all-exhaustive, and further research and care should always be sought and provided when it comes to any species one may prospectively be interested in. These care sheets are also not intended to serve as substitutes for professional veterinary medical care and husbandry should any animal require it. Always seek proper and professional veterinary care for any animal should the need arise, and be prepared ahead of time for any and all husbandry costs and expenses that may occur with any animal beyond the initial purchase. Any animal owned is ultimately a matter of personal/individual care and responsibility.

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