



*Jason Hood

Black Headed Python (*Aspidites melanocephalus*)

Black Headed Hunters

Black headed pythons are a medium sized terrestrial python indigenous to the arid to semi-arid desert, and scrubland regions of northern Australia. They are a moderately built species of python with a ground color ranging from light brown, yellowish, to tan or cream color with darker brown or reddish brown cross bands. The head and neck are distinctly black, giving this species a “sockhead” appearance and their common name. These active, diurnal to crepuscular pythons can be voracious predators of small mammals, birds, and smaller reptiles and amphibians, often subduing them either by constriction, or simply compression against the walls of a burrow. This genus of pythons to which black headed pythons belong to, *Aspidites* (which translates to shield bearer), is further unique among pythons in that heat sensitive labial pits found on most other boas and pythons are lacking. Black headed pythons are a higher end, invigorating and uniquely sought after species that make for great, less commonly seen additions for nearly any pet owner or enthusiast.

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: *Aspidites*

Species: *Aspidites melanocephalus**

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, black headed pythons can attain longevity of 15 to 25 years or more. Up to 35 to 40 years is also known.

Distribution and Habitat

Black headed pythons are a medium sized terrestrial python indigenous to the arid to semi-arid desert, grassland, and scrubland regions of northern Australia. Specifically, they may be found from northern Western Australia, through the northern Northern Territory, and much of northwestern to northern Queensland. Within this range, black headed pythons occupy primarily

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terrestrial environments, including a variety of warm, arid to semi-arid habitats, from dry, sclerophyll forests to other open, dry forests and woodlands, to sparsely vegetated deserts, scrublands, grasslands, dune areas, and savannahs. Black headed pythons especially favor these above habitats when ample access to retreats and cover are available in the form of burrows, rock crevices and rocky outcroppings, tree hollows and cavities, hollowed logs, to other areas of dense shrubs and other vegetation and ground cover.

Conservation Status

IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC).

Legal and Regulatory Status(*Subject to Change)

Pythonidae spp. are CITES Appendix II (Except the subspecies included in Appendix I) as of October 2017. Also consult with your local, municipal, and state ordinances and regulations for any ownership restrictions.

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Black headed pythons range from about 8 to 12 inches as hatchlings, and 5 to 9 feet, or 54 to 108 inches as adults, although slightly larger sizes are also not uncommon.

Housing and Enclosure

Housing must be sealed, well ventilated, and escape proof. Hatchling blackhead pythons can be started out in a 20 gallon long terrarium or similar sized enclosure, but will soon require larger accommodations. If glass enclosures are used at any point, be sure that the enclosure retains sufficient humidity. Many of the commercially made plastic or fiberglass enclosures, or otherwise custom-designed enclosures that can retain heat and humidity well are perhaps the best and most practical enclosures to use to house mid to large sized boas and pythons. Depending on the age and size of the animal, a four to six foot by two foot enclosure or larger is required. Black headed pythons can be maintained on a substrate of fine aspen shavings, cage liner material, cypress mulch, or sphagnum fir mixtures, but always ensure that the substrate does not become too damp or moist. Do not use pine or cedar shavings, as these substrates are toxic to snakes. These pythons will also require a large sturdy water dish or tub that must be cleaned, sanitized, and changed regularly, especially if dirtied. Providing an adequately sized hidebox, artificial foliage, driftwood, rocks, logs, and other cage furnishings can also provide additional hiding and basking opportunities. Black headed pythons will climb if given the opportunity, but floor space is more important than height.

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 black headed pythons range from 75 to 82 degrees F on the cool side and 85 to 95 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.

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Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Carnivorous; In the wild, black headed pythons are carnivorous, and will prey upon a wide range of small mammals, birds, amphibians, and other reptiles that they can ambush, locate, and consume. In captivity, black headed pythons can be given feeder rodents of appropriate size, such as rats or mice. In most general circumstances, it is recommended to provide humanely pre-killed prey animals acquired from a reputable source, as offering live animals to any snake can carry risk of serious injury or even death to your snake when the prey item bites to defend itself or otherwise gnaws on your animal. A general rule of thumb when selecting feeder prey item 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 these things can be alarming, 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 as those of one's animals can be given as well.

Handling

As with many snakes, hatchling and juvenile blackheads may initially be nervous and defensive. They may musk or defecate, or bite when alarmed. Handle your blackhead gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal. Many black headed pythons will become docile, personable, and more tolerant and accustomed to handling as they become older and can make for impressive display specimens. However, this genus of pythons often exhibits a strong and motivated feeding response, which can be mistaken for aggression or defensiveness. This is a species that should be handled carefully to prevent a feeding related bite or cases of mistaken identity.

****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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