



\*Mike Day

## Corn or Red Rat Snake (*Pantherophis guttatus*)

## Great Plains Rat Snake (*Pantherophis emoryi*)

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### An American Classic

Also known as the red rat snake, corn snakes are a medium to large sized colubrid native to the Southeastern United States. Corn snakes have a light orange, tan, to beige ground color with deeper reddish-orange dorsal blotches outlined in black. They also usually have an arrowhead pattern on back of the head and neck as well, and a black and white checkered belly or ventral surface. This light and dark checkered ventral is often said to resemble maize, or ears of Indian corn. They are strongly built, semi-arboreal snakes, and can climb trees, shrubs, barns, and other outbuildings in search of refuge and small mammals and birds as prey. Corn snakes are widely produced in many captive bred color and pattern cultivars known as “morphs”, and are a species in which their captive care and propagation in the 1950s and 1960s pioneered herpetoculture to a great degree. The Great Plains, or Emory’s Ratsnake (*Pantherophis emoryi*), formerly considered a subspecies of corn snake, occupies northern Mexico, north through Texas and the south central United States and has similar natural history and captive husbandry requirements. It has a ground color consisting of tan, light brown, to cream color with darker alternating dorsal and lateral blotches, and spear point markings on the back of the head and neck, as with the corn snake, but typically lacks the red, yellow, or orange pigmentation of the corn snake.

### 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

**Subfamily:** Colubrinae

**Genus:** Pantherophis

**Species:** *Pantherophis guttatus*\*

\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

### Lifespan and Longevity

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If provided the proper care, corn snakes can attain longevity of 15 to 25 years or more in captivity.

### **Distribution and Habitat**

Corn snakes are native to the southeastern to south central United States. Within this range, they can occupy a variety of habitats including coastal dunes, pine-palmetto scrublands, agricultural and residential areas, and other dry, sandy upland forests and woodlands.

### **Conservation Status**

IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC).

### **Experience Level Required**

Novice/Beginner.

### **Size**

Corn, or red rat snakes range from 5 to 10 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 corn snakes can be housed in a 10 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adult corn snakes should be housed in a minimum of a 20 to 40 gallon long terrarium or enclosure. Corn snakes are semi-arboreal, but 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 corn snakes range from 75 to 80 degrees F on the cool side and 80 to 88 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, corn snakes are carnivorous, and will prey upon rodents and other small mammals, small birds, bird eggs, and other smaller vertebrates. Hatchlings and juveniles will also occasionally eat smaller frogs, lizards, or other reptiles. In captivity, corn snakes 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

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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 as those of one's animals can be given as well.

### **Handling**

As with many snakes, hatchling and juvenile corn snakes may initially be nervous and defensive. Corn snakes may rattle their tails, musk or defecate, or bite when alarmed. Handle your corn snake gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal. Most corn snakes 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](mailto:info@madisonherps.org)

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