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## Cribos and Indigo Snakes (*Drymarchon corais* ssp.) and (*Drymarchon couperi*)

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### Largest Colubrids of the Americas

Cribos, also known as the middle American indigo snakes, and their close relatives, the Indigo snakes of the United States and North America, are large, active, diurnal, and primarily terrestrial snakes. They are not true constrictors, and typically rather simply seize and overpower any smaller prey with their jaws and/or coils. Cribos are large smooth scaled colubrid snakes that can vary in color depending on the species and subspecies, and can range from light or dark brown, olive brown, yellowish or yellowish brown, tan, to grayish or blackish with coloration differing at a gradient from light to dark or vice versa towards the tail depending on the species. There may also often be several darker “tear drop” shaped streaks beneath the eyes, labial (lip) scales, as well as on the nape (neck) or anterior portion of the body. There are approximately six (6) species of Middle American cribos, but the species that appear most frequently in captivity include the Texas Indigo snake (*D. corais erebennus*), Unicolor Cribo (*D. corais unicolor*), Black Tailed Cribo (*D. corais melanurus*), and Yellow Tailed Cribo (*D. corais corais*).

The eastern indigo snake can be acquired in trade, but is currently listed as a federally threatened species, and requires the necessary permits and documentation in order to possess or propagate. For this purposes of this care sheet though, most of the care, husbandry, and natural history of the eastern indigo is similar to that of the Middle American cribos. As with indigo snakes, cribos, when threatened will rattle their tails in dry vegetation, hiss and assume a coiled striking position, and secrete a noxious smelling musk to deter possible predators. The Eastern Indigo Snake (*D. couperi*) is a large, smooth scaled uniformly colored colubrid with a glossy black to bluish black iridescent ground color, and reddish, tan, to reddish orange on the chin, lower jaw, and throat. Eastern indigo snakes are indigenous to the xeric pine-palmetto scrublands, pine forests, and other dry, sandy uplands and wetland margins of the southeastern United States.

### Taxonomy

**Life:** All living, physical, and animate entities

**Domain:** Eukaryota

**Kingdom:** Animalia

**Phylum/Sub Phylum:** Chordata/Vertebrata

**Class:** Reptilia

**Order:** Squamata

**Suborder:** Serpentes

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**Infraorder:** Alethinophidia

**Family:** Colubridae

**Subfamily:** Colubrinae

**Genus:** Drymarchon

**Species:** *Drymarchon couperi*\* and *Drymarchon corais*\*

\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

### **Lifespan and Longevity**

If provided the proper care, cribos and indigo snakes can attain longevity of at least 15 to 20 years or more.

### **Distribution and Habitat**

Cribos and Indigo snakes belong to a genus of large, active colubrid snakes indigenous to the southeastern and south central United States, Central America, and into South America, depending upon the species and subspecies. The Cribos are a Central and South American group of species within this genus, ranging from Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guiana, Guyana, Peru, Suriname, Venezuela, and Trinidad. Middle American species can range from southern Texas in the United States, through the Gulf Coast of Mexico, Yucatan Peninsula, Guatemala, and Belize. Within this range, cribos occupy primarily terrestrial environments, including dry to semi-humid, tropical to sub-tropical forests and woodlands, scrublands and scrub-forests, semi-open mesquite savannahs, to open grasslands, swamplands, riverine marshes, and the margins of other wetlands, as well as agricultural and suburban, or residential areas. Other species of United States indigo snakes tend to be further habitat specialists, where they may be found in large tracts of open to semi-open, sub-tropical pine-palmetto scrublands to scrub-forests, sand dunes, flatwoods, riparian thickets, and other dry hammocks and glades with well drained, sandy soil.

### **Conservation Status**

Conservation status is dependent upon the species. *D. couperi* is IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC). *D. corais* is Not Evaluated for the IUCN Red List (NE) or otherwise Data Deficient (DD).

### **Legal and Regulatory Status(\*Subject to Change)**

*Drymarchon corais couperi* Endangered Species Act of 1974 listed species (AL, GA, FL). Also consult with your local, municipal, and state ordinances and regulations for any ownership restrictions.

### **Experience Level Required**

Intermediate/Moderate.

### **Size**

Hatchling cribos and indigo snakes are large, and can range from 12 to 16 inches in length. As adults, the cribo and indigo snakes can attain average sizes of 6 to 9 feet, or 72 to 108 inches, making them among North America's largest snakes.

### **Housing and Enclosure**

Housing must be sealed and escape proof, as well as be adequately ventilated. Growth rates for cribos and indigo snakes can vary considerably depending on the animal's diet and husbandry, as well as even the individual animal. Hatchling indigo snakes and cribos can be started off for the first few months within a 15 to 20 gallon terrarium or similar sized enclosure, but can graduate up to accordingly larger enclosures as the animal grows. Once they reach three to four feet in length, these snakes should be moved into increasingly larger housing such as at minimum a 40 to 55 gallon long terrarium or similar sized enclosure. Once an indigo snake or cribo has reached

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its adult size, a minimum of a 6 foot by 3 foot commercially available plastic or injection molded enclosure is required for these large, active snakes. Provide a substrate that can enable burrowing and hiding opportunities such as sphagnum and fir mixtures, orchid bark, or cypress mulch. Do not use pine or cedar shavings, as these substrates are toxic to snakes. Other furnishings should include providing a water bowl or dish and a hide box at all times in the enclosure. Artificial foliage, driftwood, rocks, logs, and other cage furnishings can provide additional basking and hiding opportunities. These snakes are large and active, and will uproot, dislodge, or destroy all but the most securely or firmly planted furnishings provided inside their enclosure. Additional humidity can also be created when needed by providing a humid hide lined with additional cypress mulch and/or sphagnum moss. Indigo snakes and cribos will climb, but providing floor space is more important than height.

### **Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity**

In addition, a thermal gradient (or a warm side) in the cage/enclosure should be created with an appropriate sized under tank heating pad, ceramic, or radiant heat emitter. Being large, active, diurnal snakes, access to ample light (including full spectrum lighting) may not be essentially required, but will greatly benefit these species when kept in captivity, with a 12 to 14 hour day/night or light cycle being most often recommended. Indigo snakes and cribos are also generally relatively intolerant of higher ambient temperatures exceeding 80 degrees F, and most species will display signs of heat stress if exposed to ambient temperature ranges exceeding this range. For most indigos and cribos, a warm, basking spot of 85 to 90 degrees, and an overall enclosure of ambient temperature of 75 to 80 degrees F is most recommended. Humidity should also be kept relatively high at around 70% using the appropriate substrates, as well as maintaining adequate hydration of these snakes by misting, providing a large water bowl for soaking, or using any of the commercially available reptile misters or foggers.

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. Indigos and cribos, being voracious eaters, are also very messy snakes to maintain, and have relatively high metabolisms for large snakes as well, which means they will frequently defecate and excrete other wastes, and as a result, more frequent substrate changings and overall cage cleaning and maintenance. 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, indigo snakes and cribos are carnivorous, and are active, powerful predators of nearly any smaller animals they can catch and overpower using their strong jaws and/or coils including rodents and other small mammals, birds, lizards, eggs, frogs and other amphibians, and other reptiles including other snakes.

In captivity, indigo snakes and cribos are well known for their voracious appetites, but care should be taken to not overfeed them, as obesity, regurgitation, and other long term health and husbandry issues can result. Food items that will be readily eaten by cribos and indigo snakes include appropriately sized feeder rodents such as rats or mice, chicks, quail, other feeder birds or poultry, and occasionally feeder fish. Unlike many similar sized snakes, such as boas or pythons, these snakes also have relatively inflexible jaws, and many keepers and breeders of these species recommend more frequent, smaller feedings or meals vs larger, more infrequent feedings. Most hatchlings can be started off on large pinkie mice every 3 to 5 days. Food items can gradually be increased or changed in size and frequency as needed. As adults, most cribos and indigo snakes can be given small to medium adult sized rats one to two times per week, or approximately every 5 to 7 days or otherwise at a tailored feeding frequency adequate in maintaining that individual animal's adequate weight. Indigo snakes and cribos are not

constrictors, but can often become very food aggressive when in the presence of food, and will frequently and violently attempt to kill and overpower their food until they become more acclimated to feeding more civilly over time. 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 young indigos and cribos will often tend to be more nervous and defensive, and may gape and hiss, rapidly rattle their tails, or attempt to strike in self-defense. Imported or wild caught cribos can also be somewhat nervous and defensive. Most captive bred specimens, however, can become quite tame and personable snake species to maintain with regular handling and interaction, and can make for impressive, active, and alert snakes with high levels of perception that make the *Drymarchon* genus an enjoyable taxa of snakes to keep, work with, or breed by the more intermediate to advanced level hobbyist or enthusiast. It should also be remembered that *Drymarchon* are typically voracious eaters in captivity, and have very strong feeding responses during times when food is detected. Therefore, it should be advisable that at least some level of care and handling should be practiced when keeping or working with this genus, particularly when first entering an enclosure for maintenance or to remove the snake for other purposes.

**\*\*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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