



Ladder Rat Snake (*Elaphe/Rhineachis scalaris*)

Climbing Up the Ladder in Boldness

The ladder ratsnake, or simply ladder snake, is a medium sized to large species of old world ratsnake with a fairly wide and broad range over the Iberian peninsula, where they are often found in areas of shrubby or brushy cover. As with most other ratsnake species, ladder ratsnakes are powerful and active, arboreal to semi-arboreal snakes which can climb quite well in search of shelter and/or smaller prey items. Ladder ratsnakes are a fairly medium sized to large species of colubrid with a rather pointed head and snout, and a ground color ranging from light to dark brown, grayish, to yellowish or yellowish brown with a pair of two darker longitudinal stripes running the length of the snake's body. Much fainter or lighter cross bars or banding may also be present in between the stripes on the dorsum, giving them the name "ladder" ratsnake. Hatchling and juvenile snakes are typically much more boldly colored and patterned than adults, and also have thick, dark post-ocular stripes and several other dark markings along the head. Ladder ratsnakes, although not as widely available as some other ratsnake species, can make for personable and unique species to maintain in captivity for the more intermediate 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: Colubridae

Subfamily: Colubrinae

Genus: *Elaphe/Rhinechis*

Species: *Elaphe/Rhinechis scalaris*

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, ladder ratsnakes can attain longevity of 15 to 25 years or more.

Distribution and Habitat

Ladder ratsnakes are a fairly wide and broad ranging species over the Iberian Peninsula located in the Middle-East. They will often occupy scrubby or brushy areas including orchards,

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vineyards, stone walls or other rocky areas, and other vegetation from Portugal, Spain, and southern France to extreme northwestern Italy within this range. Within this range, ladder ratsnakes occupy primarily arboreal to semi-arboreal environments, including a variety of rocky, well-vegetated Mediterranean habitats including open to semi-open forests and woodlands, savannahs, shrublands, to ecotone or edge habitats such as field edges, vineyards, hedges, stone walls and ruins, and other agricultural and suburban areas near areas of human habitation.

Conservation Status

IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC).

Legal and Regulatory Status(*Subject to Change)

Consult with your local, municipal, and state ordinances and regulations for any ownership restrictions.

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Ladder ratsnakes can range from about 5 to 12 inches as hatchlings, and 4 to 6 feet on average as adults, or 48 to 72 inches or slightly larger.

Housing and Enclosure

Housing must be sealed, secure, and escape proof. Hatchling ladder ratsnakes can be housed in a 10 to 20 gallon long or tall terrarium or enclosure. Adult ladder ratsnakes should be housed in a minimum of a 40 to 55 gallon tall or long terrarium or enclosure. Ladder ratsnakes are semi-arboreal, and height can be just as important as floor space for this species. Provide a substrate that can enable burrowing or hiding and that retains humidity well such as cypress mulch, orchid bark, 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, branches, driftwood, perches, or other hides. Also be sure to include a sturdy water bowl or dish as well. Additional humid hides can be provided as well for additional humidity.

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 ladder ratsnakes 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, ladder ratsnakes 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, ladder ratsnakes 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

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

Handling

As with many snakes, hatchling and juvenile rat snakes of most species may initially be nervous and defensive. They may rattle their tails, musk or defecate, or bite when alarmed. Handle them gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal. There is some variability in temperaments of ladder rat snakes. Many snakes will become more tolerant and accustomed to handling as they become older. Some species and even individuals however have a reputation for remaining somewhat aggressive or irascible 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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