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Madagascar Hognose Snakes (*Leioheterodon* spp.)

“The Hognose of Madagascar”

Madagascar hognose snakes are medium sized to large terrestrial snakes that can be quite variable in color and patterning depending the species being described. The Madagascar giant species have a ground color ranging from blackish to dark brown or olive grading into a lighter dorsal color of tan, light brown to yellowish with a series of dark checkered dorsal and lateral blotches and markings. As with other hognose snakes, members of the genus *Leioheterodon* are well known for their elaborate defensive displays, which can include hissing, flattening or triangulation of their head and neck to resemble a “cobra”, and engaging in mock striking. If this behavior fails to deter a predator, or if the snake is continued to be harassed, threatened, or physically attacked or handled, they will flip over and writhe around with their mouths open while defecating and regurgitating, and will finally feign, or “play dead”. Also as with other hognose snake species, they will often regurgitate, and/or expel musk and feces when disturbed or if continued to be harassed or threatened. Hognose snakes also belong to a subfamily of snakes, Xenodontinae, which possess specialized, enlarged rear teeth in their mouths designed for capturing and swallowing frogs, toads, and amphibians. However, hognose snakes are harmless to humans and other larger animals, and serious complications from their bites are quite rare and atypical.

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: Lamprophiinae/Pseudoxyrhophiinae

Genus: *Leioheterodon*

Species: *Leioheterodon* spp.*

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

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If provided the proper care, the Madagascar hognose snake species can attain longevity of at least 15 to 25 years or more.

Species

The Madagascar, or Malagasy giant hognose snakes are medium sized, moderately built colubrids indigenous to a variety of habitats of Madagascar. Three species are known: The Madagascar Hognose Snake (*Leioheterodon madagascariensis*), Blonde Hognose Snake (*Leioheterodon modestus*), and Speckled Hognose Snake (*Leioheterodon geayi*). The blonde hognose snake is a light uniformly colored tan, light brown, or pale yellow. Finally, the speckled hognose snake ranges in color from light brown, to orange or orangish-brown with dark speckling and edging around each scale, giving it its speckled appearance.

Distribution and Habitat

All three of the Madagascar hognose snake species occur only on the island of Madagascar, as their common names imply. The different species may occupy different areas and habitats, including tropical forests and woodlands, savannahs, to coastal dunes and scrubland.

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

Madagascar hognose snakes range from about 6 to 12 inches as hatchlings, and 36 to 54 inches, or 3 to 5 feet for most adults. Unlike North American hognose snake species, there is no significant sexual dimorphism with Madagascar hognose snake species.

Housing and Enclosure

Housing must be sealed, secure, and escape proof. Hatchling and juvenile Madagascar hognose snakes can be housed in a 20 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adult Madagascar hognose snakes should be housed in a minimum of a 40 to 55 gallon long terrarium or enclosure. These snakes 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 Malagasy giant hognose snakes range from 75 to 80 degrees F on the cool side and 85 to 90 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,

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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, Madagascar hognose snakes are carnivorous, and tend to be amphibian and specifically frog and toad specialists, although other vertebrates are also occasionally eaten. In captivity, unlike many other hognose snake species, Madagascar hognose snakes can be switched to, and be given feeder rodents of appropriate size, such as rats or mice, although many hatchlings and juveniles may still require scenting. 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 as those of one's animals can be given as well.

Handling

The Madagascar hognose snakes are active and energetic species, but can usually be readily tamed and handled. As with many snakes, hatchling and juvenile hognose snakes may initially be more nervous and defensive. They may flatten their necks, hiss, and mock strike, or occasionally death feign. Handle your Malagasy hognose gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal. As with other hognose species, these species do possess enlarged rear teeth and are mildly venomous. However, they very seldom bite people, and should not be considered dangerous or medically significant, although localized reactions have been reported from these species to varying degrees.

****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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