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North American Racers (*Coluber constrictor* ssp.)

Coachwhips (*Coluber flagellum* ssp.)

North America's Fastest Snakes

Racers are very smooth and sleek scaled snakes that can vary considerably in color and appearance depending on the subspecies. Juveniles of most subspecies have a grayish to tan or light brown ground color with reddish to reddish brown blotches, mottling, and saddles that fade ontogenetically as adults to become a solid, uniformly black, slate gray, tan, light to dark brown, buttermilk, bluish, turquoise, to yellowish. Coachwhips are large, slender bodied snakes with scalation giving them a heavily braided appearance, hence their common name. Depending on the subspecies, coachwhips can be quite variable in color and appearance, ranging from blackish or slate gray, to tan, light or tawny brown, yellowish, to pinkish or reddish-pink, sometimes with indistinct banding.

Both racers and coachwhips are large, active, diurnal predators and hunters of nearly any smaller vertebrates and invertebrates they can capture and overpower. They will often periscope over tall grass and other debris and objects, and utilize their keen vision to locate potential prey and predators. As their names imply, racers and coachwhips are among the fastest snakes in North America, travelling at short bursts of speed up to 8 to 10 mph. Although they are not constrictors as their scientific names sometimes imply, they nevertheless will use their powerful jaws and coils to subdue and overpower their prey. When threatened, and if they are unable to escape otherwise, these snakes will often stand their ground by rapidly vibrating their tails, and coiling and striking repeatedly. Racers and coachwhips are occasionally kept in captivity, where they can make for intriguing terrarium specimens under the right conditions and setups, although they are infrequently bred in captivity due somewhat to their nervous and active dispositions.

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

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Subfamily: Colubrinae

Genus: Coluber

Species: *Coluber constrictor** and *Coluber flagellum**

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, the North American racers and coachwhips can attain longevity of at least 10 to 20 years or more.

Species and Subspecies

For North American racers, subspecies include, but are not limited to the buttermilk racer (*C. c. anthicus*), northern black racer (*C. c. constrictor*), southern black racer (*C. c. priapus*), tan racer (*C. c. etheridgei*), eastern yellow bellied racer (*C. c. flaviventris*), western yellow bellied racer (*C. c. mormon*), blue racer (*C. c. foxii*), everglades racer (*C. c. paludicola*), and blackmask racer (*C. c. latrunculus*).

For coachwhips, subspecies include the eastern coachwhip (*C. f. flagellum*), western coachwhip (*C. f. testaceus*), Sonoran coachwhip (*C. f. cingulum*), and red coachwhip, or red racer (*C. f. piceus*).

Distribution and Habitat

North American racers are medium sized to large, active, primarily diurnal snakes that are widely distributed as a species over much of the United States, Canada, and Mexico. These racers consist of eleven (11) subspecies, ranging from the southeastern, eastern, northeastern, Midwestern, central, south-central, to southwestern United States, and southeastern Canada depending on subspecies, and are habitat generalists, being found in prairies, fields, agricultural and suburban areas, wetland margins, and ecotone (edge) habitats.

Coachwhips favor open, sandy soiled habitats depending on their range, including open fields, prairies, pine or scrub palmetto flatwoods and barrens, agricultural areas, grasslands, scrublands, to semi-deserts. Coachwhips are also large, active, diurnal colubrid snakes indigenous to the southeastern, eastern, south central, and southwestern United States and northern Mexico depending on the subspecies.

Conservation Status

IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC).

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Hatchling and juvenile North American racers range from 5 to 10 inches, and reach adult sizes of 3 to 6 feet, or 36 to 72 inches. Juvenile and hatchling coachwhips begin at 6 to 12 inches, and can attain adult sizes of up to 6 to 7 feet, or 72 to 84 inches, with greater lengths occasionally reported.

Housing and Enclosure

Housing must be sealed and escape proof, as well as be adequately ventilated. Growth rates for racers and coachwhips can vary considerably depending on the animal's diet and husbandry, as well as even the individual animal. Hatchling racers and coachwhips can be started off for the first few months within a 15 to 20 gallon terrarium or similar sized enclosure, and but should be transitioned to accordingly larger enclosures as the animal grows. Once they reach three to four

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feet in length, these snakes should be moved into increasingly larger housing of at least a 40 to 55 gallon long or similar sized enclosure. Once these snakes reach adult size, a minimum of a six foot by three foot commercially available plastic or injection molded enclosure will be required for these large, active snakes. Substrates that can enable burrowing and hiding opportunities can include fine aspen shavings, cypress mulch, or orchid bark. 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, and other cage furnishings can provide additional security. These snakes are large and active though, 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. Racers and coachwhips will climb readily, and some height in addition to floor space is important for these snakes.

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 UVA/UVB 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. For these snakes, 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 60 to 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. Racers and coachwhips, 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, racers and coachwhips 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, racers and coachwhips 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 racer and coachwhip species include appropriately sized, pre-killed feeder rodents, such as rats or mice, chicks, quail, other feeder birds or poultry, and occasionally feeder fish of appropriate nutritional value. Hatchlings and juveniles have a tendency to be more insectivorous, and can be started off on appropriately sized feeder insects dusted with vitamin D3 and calcium, as well as large pinkie mice every 3 to 5 days. Food items can gradually be increased or changed in size and frequency as needed. As adults, racers and coachwhips 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. Despite their scientific names, racers and coachwhips 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

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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 racers and coachwhips 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. Racers and coachwhips are not frequently propagated in captivity, with most still being wild caught or only captive hatched, and are known for their active, fast moving, and defensive tendencies, but can become hardy, bold, and well acclimated snakes to maintain and interact with for the more dedicated and intermediate herp enthusiast.

****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

Disclaimer: Note that the information provided in these, or any care sheets, are not intended to be all-exhaustive, and further research and care should always be sought and provided when it comes to any species one may prospectively be interested in. These care sheets are also not intended to serve as substitutes for professional veterinary medical care and husbandry should any animal require it. Always seek proper and professional veterinary care for any animal should the need arise, and be prepared ahead of time for any and all husbandry costs and expenses that may occur with any animal beyond the initial purchase. Any animal owned is ultimately a matter of personal/individual care and responsibility.

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