



North American Rat Snakes (*Pantherophis obsoletus*) *Pantherophis spiloides*) (*Pantherophis alleghaniensis*) and [*Pantherophis bairdii*]-Baird's Ratsnake

Climbers and Rodent Controllers

The North American ratsnakes are medium to large North American colubrid species that can be quite variable in color and pattern. Western, midland and some individuals of the eastern species are black or blackish brown with absent or obscured patterning, while others have much more visible traces of dark blotches on a gray, yellowish, tan, orangish, or brown base color. Some eastern races or intergrades thereof may have 2 or more dark longitudinal stripes or blotches. The Baird's ratsnake is a salmon pinkish brown to orange-yellow with four longitudinal stripes similar to some eastern species. Ratsnakes are strong, arboreal to semi-arboreal colubrids, and will often scale trees, cliff and rock faces, barns, and other outbuildings in search of refuge and smaller prey. Many color and pattern "morphs" exist as well including albinos, brindle, white sided, leucistic, and hypomelanistic. The North American rat snakes are a hardy, and easily maintained colubrid that has long been a popular favorite among those seeking to keep native, North American species.

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 obsoletus**, *Pantherophis spiloides**, and *Pantherophis alleghaniensis**

Also *Pantherophis bairdii**

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Lifespan and Longevity

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

Distribution and Habitat

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North American ratsnakes range from southern Canada, much of the United States, and northern Mexico depending on species, where they are typically arboreal to semi arboreal. North American ratsnakes can be found in a variety of habitats depending on their range and species, but are often the most common “large snakes” even in suburban and metropolitan areas over much of their range. They may also occur in deciduous forests and woodlands, agricultural areas, semi-desert and scrubland, swamps and the margins of lakes, rivers, and other wetlands, and coastal regions.

Conservation Status

IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC).

Experience Level Required

Novice/Beginner to Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

North American ratsnakes can range from about 5 to 12 inches as hatchlings, and 3 to 6 feet on average as adults, or 36 to 72 inches or slightly larger depending on the species.

Housing and Enclosure

Housing must be sealed, secure, and escape proof. Hatchling North American ratsnakes can be housed in a 10 to 20 gallon long or tall terrarium or enclosure. Adult North American ratsnakes should be housed in a minimum of a 40 to 55 gallon tall or long terrarium or enclosure. North American 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 North American 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, North American 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, North American 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 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

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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 among the North American 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. The Baird's ratsnake tends to be a mild mannered and easily handled species.

****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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