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Natal Green Snakes (*Philothamnus* sp.)

African Bush Gems

Also known as the African bush snakes, the natal green snakes are a genus of fairly small colubrid snakes with approximately 19 species widely distributed over much of sub-Saharan Africa, with range dependent upon the exact species. The Natal green snake, *P. natalensis*, is perhaps the most commonly kept, bred, and imported species in this genus. Natal green snakes are slender bodied snakes with fairly distinct, elongated heads, and proportionally large eyes with rounded pupils. The dorsal scales are smooth, and unkeeled, although the ventral and sub caudal scales of some species are more strongly keeled for gripping and climbing trees. Ground color is typically un-patterned, uniform shades of light to dark green or olive depending on the species, although some species can also have darker banding or blotches of black, brown, to reddish-bronze. Some species may even have blue scalation as well. Natural history and habits can also vary somewhat with the species, with some species being more slender bodied and arboreal, and with others being more stocky-bodied and terrestrial, to even semi-aquatic snakes.

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: *Philothamnus*

Species: *Philothamnus* sp.*

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

Captive longevity for these species is not widely available. However, these species can be expected to attain captive longevity perhaps similar to their North American relatives of at least 5 or more years under the correct husbandry and conditions.

Distribution and Habitat

The natal green snakes are fairly small, slender bodied snakes widespread across much of Sub-

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Saharan Africa, with more exact ranges depending upon the species. The majority of species, however, range across central Africa, from the DR of Congo, Tanzania, Angola, and Zambia, to Mozambique, Kenya, and Zimbabwe. Most species occur in or near wetlands or other bodies of water, including the margins of lakes, ponds, streams, or rivers, and can occur in surrounding open forests and woodlands, savannahs, montane forests, and coastal brushlands, to agricultural areas.

Conservation Status

Conservation status is dependent upon the species. Some are IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC). Others are Not Evaluated for the IUCN Red List (NE) or otherwise Data Deficient (DD).

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Hatchling natal green snakes are tiny, reaching only 2 to 4 inches. Adult natal green snakes of most species range from approximately 22 to 35 inches, with somewhat larger sizes occasionally reported up to nearly 50 inches.

Housing and Enclosure

Housing must be sealed and escape proof, as well as well-ventilated. Typically for one to two adult snakes, a minimum of a 20 to 30 gallon tall terrarium or enclosure will be needed. Substrates that promote bioactivity, and moderate to high humidity, including coconut husk fibers, sphagnum moss, cypress mulch, or orchid bark should be used for these snakes. Do not use pine or cedar shavings, as these substrates are toxic to snakes. Provide a sturdy water bowl or dish and a hide box at all times in the enclosure. Natal green snakes will also benefit highly from regular misting for their hydration, either manually, or through the use of a misting or fogging system at least once to twice weekly. They will drink the condensation and moisture from their scales and surrounding areas of the enclosure more so than from a standing water bowl. Natal green snakes can be terrestrial to arboreal depending on the species, but should be given an ample variety of live or artificial plants, vines, driftwood, cork bark, perches, rock or log hides, and other furnishings for sufficient hiding, basking, and climbing opportunities.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

Create a thermal gradient (or a warm side) in the cage/enclosure with an appropriate sized under tank heating pad, ceramic, nighttime red bulb, or radiant heat emitter. Unlike many snakes, natal green snakes also require, and benefit from the appropriate overhead incandescent and UVA/UVB full spectrum lighting. This UVA/UVB lighting is preferred for these snakes in order to allow for them to properly synthesize the needed calcium and vitamin D3. Overall, suitable temperatures for natal green snakes can range from 80 to 88 degrees on the warm, basking side, and 75 to 80 degrees on the cooler side, and ambient temperatures. A 10 to 12 degree drop in temperatures overnight, as well as a 12 to 14 hour day/night cycle for these snakes is also recommended. Overall, UV lighting, as well as adequate ventilation, climbing, and basking opportunities are the largest considerations to keep in mind when keeping this genus. 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

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Insectivorous to Carnivorous; Natal green snakes are active, alert, and sight oriented snakes, feeding on a variety of small, or soft bodied worms, slugs, insects, arachnids, and other invertebrates, although they may also occasionally consume smaller reptiles, amphibians, small birds and rodents as well. Some species may also consume small fish as well.

In captivity, although undemanding, natal green snakes can be shy, and difficult feeders, often requiring time to adjust and acclimate before willingly eating. These species have reportedly been quite affinitive for live feeder frogs and/or small feeder lizards such as anoles or house geckos, although any of these food items should be ensured to be parasite free whenever possible. Frozen-thawed, or pre-killed rodents are often not taken by these species, at least initially, although some can be acclimated to small rodents such as pinkies or fuzzies. Small, live feeder fish of appropriate nutritional value, such as minnows, guppies, and danios have also been reported to be eaten in captivity as well. These species are also reported to have high metabolisms, requiring more frequent feeding intervals than many other snakes. Smaller, more frequent feedings of 3 to 5 days has seen success in maintaining these snakes. 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 natal green snakes are delicate, nervous, and shy snakes that can easily be stressed by overhandling, or otherwise prolonged handling. Most species are inoffensive, and unlikely to bite, although some will bluff by gaping and/or expanding their throats similar to boomslangs and twig snakes in defense. They have been reported to do best in darker, low traffic areas without frequent stress or disturbance. These snakes are overall better suited as a display snake species that can make for rewarding and attractive pets for the intermediate/moderate pet owner or reptile enthusiast once acclimated.

****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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