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Red backed Salamanders (*Plethodon cinereus*) and (*Plethodon serratus*)

March of the Red-backs!

Red backed salamanders, consisting of two species, the northern redback salamander (*Plethodon cinereus*) and southern redback salamander (*Plethodon serratus*), are relatively small to medium sized, slender bodied woodland or forest dwelling salamanders found over much of southern to southeastern Canada and the eastern, midwestern, and southeastern United States. In areas of suitable habitat, these salamanders can be very abundant and reach high population levels, where they consume many different small organisms in the soil, are vital components to local nutrient and carbon cycling, and serving as prey for many other small forest species. As their names imply, these slender bodied species can range in ground color from dark brownish, grayish, to black, with a broad red, orangish, or tan dorsal stripe, prominent costal grooves, and mottled bellies and sides. Several other regional color phases and even morphs, such as the “leadback” phase, where the dorsal stripe is replaced with a darker stripe or is even absent, are also frequently known. Although red backed salamanders infrequently occur in the pet trade, they nonetheless can make for extremely enjoyable species to keep and maintain for the more beginning to intermediate enthusiast.

Taxonomy

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum/Sub Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Amphibia

Order: Caudata/Urodela

Suborder: Salamandroidea

Family: Plethodontidae

Genus: *Plethodon*

Species: *Plethodon cinereus* and *Plethodon serratus**

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, redback salamanders can attain longevity of at least 5 years or potentially more.

Distribution and Habitat

The northern redback salamander occurs in southern to southeastern Canada, from Quebec,

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Prince Edward Island, and Nova Scotia, through the Midwestern, Eastern, and Northeastern United States. The southern redback salamander occurs further south and south central in the United States. Both species are common residents of moist, mature, deciduous to mixed northern forests and woodlands with ample ground cover in the form of leaf litter, rocks, logs, fallen bark, and other debris. Both species can also be found in drier, rockier forested habitats as well.

Conservation Status

Conservation status dependent upon the species. Some Not Evaluated for the IUCN Red List (NE) or otherwise Data Deficient (DD).

Legal and Regulatory Status (*Subject to Change)

Plethodon spp. Lacey Act of 1900 listed species as of 2016. Also consult with your local, municipal, and state ordinances and regulations for any ownership restrictions.

Experience Level Required

Moderate/Intermediate.

Size

Red backed salamanders typically range from 2 to 5 ½ inches as adults.

Housing and Enclosure

Housing must be sealed and escape proof with a secured lid or aquarium hood. A single adult red backed salamander can be housed in a secure, well ventilated 10 to 15 gallon aquarium or other enclosure with coconut husk, chemical free potting soil, sphagnum moss, or cypress mulch substrate. Substrate should be maintained at slightly moist levels, but should not be allowed to become too moist or dry. Any substrates used should also be maintained at as neutral of a PH as possible, and should be monitored using a PH meter. Artificial plants, cork bark hides, and driftwood can also be included as cage furnishings and additional hiding places. These salamanders can be housed together in appropriately larger enclosures depending on the age, size, and sex of the animals, but can be territorial if sufficient space and/or resources in the enclosure are not provided. Floor space is more important than height for these salamanders.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

Red backed salamanders have simple and undemanding heating and lighting requirements in captivity, and do not require additional UVA/UVB lighting, although providing it in moderated amounts can be greatly beneficial for their health, immune system, and overall wellness. For any supplemental heating that may be needed, use a low wattage incandescent or UVA/UVB bulb, radiant or ceramic heat emitter, or UTH (under tank heating element). Maintain these salamanders within a temperature range of low 60's to mid-70 degrees F. Do not exceed 75 to 80 degrees F. 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

Insectivorous to Carnivorous; Red backed salamanders are insectivorous, and in the wild they will feed on a variety of small insects, worms, and other invertebrates living in the forest soil and leaf litter. They will also occasionally consume smaller vertebrates as well, and can also be cannibalistic under certain circumstances.

In captivity, red backed salamanders may have voracious appetites, but should not be overfed in order to prevent obesity and other health related concerns. Providing variety is important, and

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these salamanders can be fed chemical and pesticide free earthworms, white worms, waxworms, silkworms, crickets, fruit flies, springtails, isopods, or roaches. No additional vitamin, mineral, or nutrient supplements are required to maintain these salamanders if the above varied diet is followed, although gutloading or supplementing with calcium and vitamin D3 can still be beneficial for their optimal health and well-being. 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

Red backed salamanders are delicate, soft bodied amphibians with sensitive, permeable skin as with most amphibians. Wash hands thoroughly before and after handling them, and avoid wearing any lotions, creams, or oils before handling any amphibian. Handling these salamanders should be minimized whenever possible and only when absolutely necessary.

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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