



*Eric Roscoe

Russian Rat Snake (*Elaphe schrenckii*)

Black Beasts of North Asia

Russian ratsnakes are large, arboreal to semi-arboreal old world ratsnakes sometimes also known as the Manchurian black water snake, Siberian ratsnake, or Amur ratsnake. A large colubrid, juveniles are brown to grayish with a series of lighter colored crossbands while most adults are typically a glossy black with dirty yellowish to pale cream colored crossbands. As with many other ratsnakes, Russian ratsnakes are strong, powerful, and active climbers, and will climb to seek refuge or smaller prey items in tree cavities, rock outcroppings, and outbuildings. They will frequently climb in search of shelter and/or food in the form of small reptiles, birds, eggs, and mammals. This species is docile, inquisitive, and mild mannered, although defensive behaviors typical of ratsnakes when disturbed can include rapidly vibrating their tail tips, musking and defecating, and/or coiling into a defensive strike posture. Nonetheless, Russian ratsnakes are a hardy, bold, active, inquisitive, and easily maintained species in captivity.

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: *Elaphe*

Species: *Elaphe schrenckii**

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Lifespan and Longevity

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

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Distribution and Habitat

The Russian, or Amur ratsnake is a large species of arboreal to semi-arboreal, Old World ratsnake species indigenous to central to eastern Asia. More specifically, this species occurs in northeastern Asia, from north central to northeastern China, Korea, Russia, and Mongolia. This species furthermore occurs in the Amur region of southeastern Russia, to the Chingan Mountains and north to Manchuria. Within this range, Russian ratsnakes occupy primarily arboreal to semi-arboreal environments, including fairly moist forest clearings and openings, to rocky forested hillsides and woodlands, scrublands, agricultural areas and farmlands, and even suburban or residential areas, where they may often be found in hollow tree and tall shrub cavities, wood and stone piles or other natural or manmade structures.

Conservation Status

Not Evaluated for the IUCN Red List (NE) or otherwise Data Deficient (DD). On China Red List as Vulnerable (VU).

Legal and Regulatory Status(*Subject to Change)

Consult with your local, municipal, and state ordinances and regulations for any ownership restrictions.

Experience Level Required

Novice/Beginner to Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Russian ratsnakes range from about 5 to 12 inches as hatchlings, and 4 to 6 feet, or 48 to 72 inches as most adults.

Housing and Enclosure

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

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Carnivorous; In the wild, Russian 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, Russian 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 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. Russian rat snakes are typically a mild mannered, active and inquisitive species when handled and can make for great pets or unique display animals.

****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. MAHS cannot make any claims or guarantees regarding any information in this care sheet therein. This care sheet may be reprinted or redistributed only in its entirety, including any and all MAHS logos and disclaimers. Last Updated: 16 December 2018.

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