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Saharan, or West African Sand Boa (*Gongylophis muelleri*)

One of a Few Egg Layers

The Saharan sand boa is a species of small and fossorial (or burrowing) heavily built and attractively colored and patterned old world boa. They will hunt and ambush smaller prey by concealing themselves in the substrate with only their eyes exposed in order to ambush small mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. Other common names for this species can include the West African sand boa or the Mueller's sand boa. This species resembles the Kenyan, or East African sand boa in that it has thick, blackish to dark brown or olive brown ground color with large yellow, yellow-orange, to orange blotches. Their heads are short and shovel like and their eyes are small and set high on their heads. Saharan sand boas can be distinguished from other sand boas, however, by their fewer dorsal blotch count, slightly more slender bodies, and unique hook like projection at the ends of their tails that other sand boas lack. These unique adaptations and features allow for these sand boas to burrow and conceal themselves in the loose sand and substrate while still being able to sense nearby or upcoming prey with only their eyes and/or heads exposed such as smaller reptiles and amphibians, small birds, and small mammals. These sand boa species are also one of only three boa species which are also ovoviviparous, or egg laying, whereas most other boas are simply oviparous, or live-bearing after the young develop in eggs internally. Saharan sand boas are an uncommonly kept or captive bred species, currently, but for the intermediate level enthusiast, can make for a unique and less commonly seen species to maintain or breed 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: Boidae

Subfamily: Erycinae

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Genus: Gongylophis

Species: *Gongylophis muelleri**

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, Saharan sand boas can attain longevity of 15 to 25 years or more in captivity, although they can reach up to 30 or even 40 years.

Distribution and Habitat

The Saharan, or West African sand boa is a relatively small, terrestrial to fossorial Old World species of boa indigenous to western to central Africa. More specifically, this unusual, egg laying species of boa occurs from Mauritania, through Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Chad, to Sudan, the Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Togo. This species also occurs from Benin, Nigeria, and to the Central African Republic. Within this range, Saharan sand boas occupy primarily terrestrial to semi-fossorial environments, including sandy to rocky environments, including the dry to semi-arid sub-deserts, to dune areas, scrublands, scrub-savannahs, grasslands, and agricultural and suburban or residential areas near human habitations. While these species of sand boas are commonly believed to, and do prefer habitats with sandy, viable soil, they can also occur in other such habitats mentioned above as well.

Conservation Status

Not Evaluated for the IUCN Red List (NE) or otherwise Data Deficient (DD).

Legal and Regulatory Status(*Subject to Change)

Boidae spp. are CITES Appendix II (Except the species included in Appendix I) as of October 2017. Also consult with your local, municipal, and state ordinances and regulations for any ownership restrictions.

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Saharan sand boas range from 4 to 6 inches as neonates, and up to 1 ½ to 2 ½ feet, or 18 to 30 inches as adults.

Housing and Enclosure

Housing must be sealed, secure, and escape proof. Neonate Saharan sand boas can be housed in a 10 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adult sand boas should be housed in a minimum of a 20 gallon long terrarium or enclosure. These sand boas are primarily terrestrial, and floor space is more important than height. Provide a substrate that can enable burrowing or hiding such as fine aspen shavings, orchid bark, or play sand mixtures. 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, driftwood, or other hides. Also be sure to include a sturdy water bowl or dish as well.

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 Saharan sand boas range from 75 to 82 degrees F on the cool side and 85 to 92 degrees F on the warm side. Most species of snakes have fairly simple and

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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, Saharan sand boas are carnivorous, and will prey upon rodents and other small mammals, small birds, amphibians, smaller reptiles, and other smaller vertebrates. In captivity, Saharan sand boas can be given feeder rodents of appropriate size, such as rats or mice. Newborn, juvenile, and some adult sand boas may require scenting with frogs or lizards, however. In most general 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, young and juvenile sand boas may initially be more nervous and defensive. Handle your sand boa gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal. Many sand boas will become more tolerant and accustomed to handling as they become older although some will remain somewhat nippy.

****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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