



Water Snakes *Genus Nerodia sp.*

- Water snakes range from southern and southeastern Canada, through much of the eastern and central United States depending on species. They occupy many types of freshwater habitats including ponds, lakes, rivers and streams, and marshes.
- Water snakes are medium to large, fairly heavy bodied snakes that can vary greatly in color and pattern depending on species. They may be banded, blotched, diamond or chain linked, striped, or solid colored with blacks, grays, browns, reddish browns, olives, or any combination of these colors thereof.
- Water snakes are hardy and undemanding snakes to maintain, although they are not frequently bred in captivity.
- If provided the proper care, water snakes can attain longevity of 10-15 years or more.

Size

Ranges from 5-8 inches as hatchlings, and 24 to 48” in adults of most species. Some of the larger species of water snakes can push 54” or 5 feet.

Housing

Housing must be sealed and escape proof. Contrary to popular belief, water snakes do not require a predominately aquatic setup (they also frequently bask and forage on land as well), and can be maintained in a similar fashion to many other colubrid snakes. Water snakes that are kept too wet or moist can develop skin & scale lesions or blisters. Neonate water snakes can be housed in a 10-15 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adult water snakes should be housed in a minimum of a 20-40 gallon long terrarium or enclosure. They will thrive on a substrate of newspaper, cage liner material, aspen or Sani Chip shavings, or cypress mulch. Do not use pine or cedar shavings, as these substrates are toxic to snakes. Provide a large water bowl or dish and a hide box at all times in the enclosure. Artificial foliage, driftwood, and other cage furnishings can provide additional security.

Create a thermal gradient (or a warm side) in the cage/enclosure with an appropriate sized under tank heating pad, ceramic, or radiant heat emitter. Overhead, incandescent lighting can also be used, but is not required for water snakes. Ideal temperatures for water snakes range from 75-80 degrees F on the cool side and 80-85 degrees F on the warm side.

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 2-3 months.

Feeding/Diet

In the wild, water snakes will prey primarily upon small fish, frogs, other amphibians, and aquatic invertebrates they can catch and consume.

In captivity, water snakes can be maintained on feeder fish of appropriate size and nutritional value. Some species of water snakes will accept frozen thawed mice as well. Some of these food items for water snakes may need to be supplemented with vitamin D3 or calcium supplements. Frozen fish can also be given, but with many piscivorous, or fish eating snakes (such as garter and water snakes), husbandry issues with thiamine deficiencies can arise if not nutritionally balanced. Food items can gradually be increased as needed. A general rule of thumb to follow when feeding snakes is to provide prey items that are approximately the same width as the widest point of the snake.

Handling

Many water snakes when first captured or handled can be ornery and cantankerous, biting, defecating, and/or excreting a very noxious smelling musk in defense. Many water snakes

in captivity however can become quite docile or acclimated to people, and will often even be able to be hand fed.

****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****