



info@aeacarizona.com

Address: 7 E. Palo Verde St.,
Suite #1
Gilbert, AZ 85296

<http://www.aeacarizona.com>

Phone: (480) 706-8478
Fax: (480) 393-3915
Emergencies: Page (602) 351-1850

Red-Tailed Boa Care

Background Information

The Boidae family is quite large and the Red-tailed Boa constrictors make up only a small part of the family. The name “Red-tailed Boa” is somewhat misleading. The name is given to several different species of Boa constrictor with red tails; it is not a unique species itself. The natural range of those snakes falling into the red-tailed category is from Central America down to South America. However, the family Boidae has members in North America as well as a few in Africa and Asia.

The red-tailed boa makes a very nice pet, but it is important to know what you are getting yourself into. Most red-tailed boas grow to be 8 –9 feet in length. There are a few reported cases of some growing up to 10 and 12 feet long, but these are rare cases. They can weigh up to 50 pounds depending on the species and diet. In addition, their life span is about 20 – 30 years. Taking on the responsibility of a red-tailed boa as a pet is a long-term commitment to its health and well-being. The first responsibility is proper housing.

Housing

Creating an enclosure for your pet boa can be quite rewarding as well as complicated. There are several points you should consider when housing a pet boa. The first thing to consider is the length of your pet. Neonates and juveniles may do well in a 10 – 20 gallon aquarium. However, they will very quickly outgrow this cage, as they may grow up to 3 -4 feet in their first year. Thus, you must be prepared to provide larger housing when the time comes. Provide a cage that is as long as the snake or longer. This enables the snake to fully stretch out. Height is as important as length and width. Take into consideration whether your pet is terrestrial (ground dwelling) or arboreal (tree dwelling). Red-taileds are semi-arboreal, which means that they spend some time in trees. For this reason, add branches and/or shelves strong enough to support your snake’s weight. This gives your pet the opportunity to climb as well as enhancing the appearance of the cage.

Bedding is another important point to take into account. Newspaper, paper toweling, unprinted paper, Astroturf, blankets, or in small tanks towels work well. These materials can be easily changed and cleaned, and are relatively inexpensive. A good plan is to have two pieces of bedding for each cage, so while one is being cleaned the other can be in use. Be careful when using blankets or towels, make sure they are large enough that your snake cannot swallow. This can happen when the blanket or towel picks up the scent of the prey animal and the snake mistakes it as more food. Wood shavings can be used as bedding, except cedar shavings, which are toxic. If using wood shavings make sure to feed on another substrate, it is too easy for



info@aeacarizona.com

Address: 7 E. Palo Verde St.,
Suite #1
Gilbert, AZ 85296

<http://www.aeacarizona.com>

Phone: (480) 706-8478
Fax: (480) 393-3915
Emergencies: Page (602) 351-1850

snakes to ingest and become impacted. Also, it is quite difficult to keep clean and free of molds and mildews.

We all like to have our own little place to go to get away from it all, and red-tailed boas are no exception. Provide a hiding space or a hide box for your snake to go when it wants to be left alone. This helps reduce stress, which makes a healthier pet.

Temperature is very important. Remember red-tailed boas are from sub-tropical to tropical climates. Temperatures of the cage should range from 85 degrees Fahrenheit at one end to 90-95 degrees at the other end during the day. This allows the snake to choose the temperature it wants or needs. At night, the cool end of the cage may go down to 80°F but no lower. Only during the hibernation period should the temperature go below 80 degrees and then it should be between 65 and 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Use thermometers and do not estimate the temperature. In addition to temperature, humidity is also important. The humidity should be high enough that your snake sheds its skin in one piece. On the other hand, it should not be so high that condensation forms on the walls of the cage.

Although light is important, there are no special lights required for boas. Boas tend to be more active from dusk until dawn. Therefore, the lighting provided should allow for a period of light and a period of darkness. The length of these periods should reflect normal lighting conditions. That is, longer days and shorter nights in the summer and shorter days and longer nights in the winter. However, you may decide to go 12 hours on and 12 hours off.

Boas do soak in and drink a lot of water. Provide a tub that can adequately handle the volume of water needed for your pet to fully submerge and not cause the water to overflow. The water should be changed daily or at least every few days and immediately if the snake defecates in the water. If you are only going to change the water every few days or if the snake defecates in the water, disinfect the water container as well. A 1:10 dilution of bleach and water or soapy water makes a good disinfectant. Remember to thoroughly rinse the container before placing it back into the cage.

Feeding

Small mammals make up the diet of the boa. Feed frogs, small lizards, and small mice to juveniles. Rats and mice are the most commonly fed prey. In some cases, rabbits can be fed. It is generally considered that prey should be no wider than the widest part of the snake. The prey may be slightly larger so long as the snake doesn't have problems swallowing it. In any case, live mice and rats should not be fed. There is a high potential for the prey to become predator if the snake is not hungry, or for them to inflict a nasty bite before the end. As for rabbits, they may kick the snake, leading to lacerated, dislocated or broken jaws.



info@aeacarizona.com

Address: 7 E. Palo Verde St.,
Suite #1
Gilbert, AZ 85296

<http://www.aeacarizona.com>

Phone: (480) 706-8478
Fax: (480) 393-3915
Emergencies: Page (602) 351-1850

You can purchase pre-killed mice and rats and store them in the freezer until needed. Just thaw at room temperature and feed, do not use microwaves as they may lead to hot spots in the food. If you must kill your own prey, cervical dislocation is considered the most humane method. Your reptile's veterinarian or food supplier should be able to explain to you how to perform this procedure or direct you to someone who can. Feeding at night is recommended, as this is the time for the best feeding response.

Young snakes can be fed every 5-7 days. Feeding may be cut back to every 10-14 days after reaching a mature size (5-6 feet). It is important to take into consideration your pet's activity level when feeding. A snake that gets a lot of exercise will need to be fed more frequently than a snake that sits in its cage all day doing nothing. A big snake is not necessarily a healthy snake. Feeding a snake too much too fast may lead to obesity which in turn may lead to health problems later on in life.

Fresh water should be available to your pet at all times. As mentioned earlier, boas drink quite often.

Shedding

As your snake grows, it will be necessary for it to shed its skin. As your pet approaches the time of shedding, its skin will get darker and eventually a blue-gray cloud will develop over its eyes. In 2-4 days, the eyes will clear and a couple of days after that he/she will shed. During this time, a rough surface, such as a log or a rock, should be available for the snake to rub against to shed its skin. It is also a good rule to limit or avoid handling your snake while its eyes are clouded over. It cannot see and is much more likely to bite during this time.

The skin should come off in one piece. If it doesn't all come off or if it comes off in several little pieces it could mean that the humidity is too low in the cage. If there is skin that remains on the snake, it may be removed by soaking the snake in warm water for 10-15 minutes, then slowly peeling the skin off in the direction of the scales. This problem may be corrected by increasing the humidity in the cage particularly at time of shedding, or by frequent misting at the time of shedding.

Sexing

Determining the sex of a juvenile is often times difficult. Your veterinarian should be consulted. He or she may be able to probe your snake. However, at an early age probes are not always accurate. It may be possible to "pop" the hemipenes of a male out through manual manipulation. Often times it is better to wait until the snake has grown. At this time, the spurs



info@aeacarizona.com

Address: 7 E. Palo Verde St.,
Suite #1
Gilbert, AZ 85296

<http://www.aeacarizona.com>

Phone: (480) 706-8478
Fax: (480) 393-3915
Emergencies: Page (602) 351-1850

on the male will be larger, the male will have a longer and thicker tail from the cloaca to the tip, and probes are more reliable.

Signs of Disease

Your pet should be examined for external parasites such as mites and ticks. A severe infestation can kill a snake by depleting their blood supply and/or cause a bacterial or viral infection. Mites are tough to get rid of. Start by wiping the snake down with a pyrethrin based flea spray, then rinse in water. The cage may also be sprayed or a pest strip, not the sticky kind, may be placed in the cage for about an hour. The cage should be given time to air out before putting the snake back. This should be repeated daily for a week then once weekly for few weeks. Treatment of ticks is manual removal followed by disinfecting the area.

Intestinal parasites may also be a problem for your snake. Your veterinarian should be consulted to do a fecal exam.

In addition to parasites, boas are prone to respiratory infections. This is characterized by foaming or bubbling around the mouth, nasal discharge, open mouth breathing, and resting in a head-vertical position. This is a serious condition and your veterinarian should be contacted. In addition to contacting your veterinarian, the temperature in the cage should be raised to the high end of the spectrum (90-95°F). Snakes are pretty good at hiding signs of disease. One of the major hallmarks of a problem is anorexia. You know the eating habits of your snake best. If your snake stops eating suddenly and it persists for more than two feedings, you should contact your veterinarian. In some cases, snakes stop eating before a shed, giving birth, or sometimes it is seasonal as for hibernation. Other signs of a problem are vomiting, regurgitation, diarrhea, excessive soaking, discolored urates (the white portion of the stool), or stargazing (staring up at nothing).

This is by no means a complete list of what to look for if your snake is sick. If you feel your pet is not doing properly contact your veterinarian.

Note: This paper is not intended to be a complete source on the care of boas. It covers some of the basics and common problems. There are several books published on the subject as well as many reptile organizations available. We encourage you to take advantage of these sources.