



Common Name: Black Head Python

Scientific Name: *Aspidites melanocephalus* sp.

Locals:

- Queensland blackhead python
- Northern territory black head python

Biology and Behaviour

Black Heads are desert pythons in nature. some tend to be nippy as young but can be tamed. Black Head Pythons, as with all pythons, are non – venomous snakes. They are a moderate sized python that may vary in size according to geographic origin most grow to around 3m. About a week prior to the snake shedding its skin the eyes turn a milky white colour as the old skin separates from the new skin underneath. During this shedding period it is normal for your python to reject food. Black Heads make great and easy captives. They are low maintenance and have good personalities, not to mention are beautiful and most subspecies are a manageable size for anyone. Black Head pythons have a lifespan of 15 – 20 years.

Requirements

You require a basic wildlife licence issued by the Department of Environment and Primary Industries.

Housing

Enclosure size for a juvenile should be 90cm (3 feet long) x 60cm (2 feet high) x 60cm (2 feet deep) should be provided, for an adult python at least 180 cm (6 feet) long x 60cm (2 feet high) and 60 cm (2 feet deep) Should be provided . Have a good look at the dimensions and ventilation of commercial enclosures if you intend to build your own. Fish tanks are NOT recommended as glass loses heat too quickly, it has poor ventilation and heat from lighting may crack the glass. They are also difficult to secure and escapes are a hazard. Black Head pythons are generally ground dwelling and can be encountered among rocks, pre existing burrows and other similar refuges. Rough surfaced rocks are a typical feature of most indoor python enclosures. They not only retain heat during the day, but also provide an ideal starting point for a python to shed its skin. The vivarium should be cleaned out at least once a week to help prevent disease and a suitable disinfectant used (F10).

Substrate

Bark, synthetic grass, sand, aspen, newspaper or butchers paper are all good clean substrates.

Water

Provide a water bowl large enough and deep enough for individuals to completely submerge in. Bathing is essential for shedding. Ensure water bowls are cleaned regularly - not only are they for bathing, they are also a source of drinking water.

Temperature and Lighting

As pythons do not have internal means of keeping the body warm, they rely on external sources such as the sun or the radiating warmth from nearby rocks to reach their desired body temperature. Black Head Pythons' body temperature is required in order to digest their food and remain active. The Black Head pythons preferred body temperature is 30 - 32°C, which it regulates by moving between warm and cool areas. The size of the enclosure will determine the wattage of the heat lamp used. As pythons are mostly nocturnal, UV lighting is not required.

Feeding

The Black Head Pythons diet usually consists of rodent's, birds and other reptiles such as lizards and snakes. A range of frozen rodents are commercially available. Feeding pythons live animals is not advised as it can cause undue distress to the prey animal and if not eaten straight away your python may run the risk of being bitten by its prey. Freshly thawed (i.e. Warmed to room or body temperature, not cold or partly frozen) food, should be placed into the pythons enclosure with tongs (or forceps) so that the snake does not mistake your hand for food. The size and quantity is relevant to the size of the python, a little common sense should be exercised to judge the size of a meal. A feeding chart should be kept to remember when the last feeding was as when your python grows feedings will be more infrequent. Offer food once every 7 days when young, if food is not taken offer again in the next 7 days and if food is not taken a third time please consults a wildlife expert. When your python is fully grown they may only eat every 14 – 21 days as they store food much more efficiently.

Handling

Black Head Pythons temperament can vary from individual to individual as with all animals, some bite others do not, the key to a steady snake is handling while it is still young, and handling often. Some snakes instinctively bite the first thing that moves when a cage door opens, this imprint may have developed because the only time the cage door had been opened was at feeding time. The snake associates the door opening with food which may be overcome by frequent handling. Pythons do get used to handling and often seem to enjoy it. Don't handle after they have eaten at least for a few days. Wash your hands before and after handling your python.

Ailments and disorders

Common disorders which python keepers should be aware of are as follows:

- Respiratory infections
 - Symptoms – loss of appetite, inactivity, wheezing, and/or nasal discharge, signs of scale rot, or blister disease.
- Mouth infections
 - Symptoms – small unaccountable bleeding lesions in gums, swelling of the mouth, snake not being able to close its mouth

- Skin Disorders
 - Symptoms – not sloughing properly or not at all.
- Internal Parasites
 - Symptoms – Weight loss, lethargy, failure to grow or thrive, lowered resistance to disease, reproductive failure, partial paralysis, and pain exhibited in the fore body, or death.
- External Parasites
 - Symptoms – minute white spots on the snakes scales, abnormal soaking in the water bowl by the snake, tiny black spots seen in the bottom of the cage or in the water bowl
- Constipation
- Neurological disorders
 - Irregular behaviour or movements in the snake such as awkwardness, shaky muscle tremors, convulsions.
- Eye disorders
 - Symptoms – pieces of skin over both or one eye, cloudy eyes, swelling.

If any of these symptoms occur in your Black Head Python please consult your veterinarian.

Juvenile care

To care for newly hatched juvenile snakes, the temperature must be constant between 28 - 30°C. Juveniles must be housed separately in small plastic type containers and placed in a heated enclosure; this allows the snake to feel secure in its surroundings. Newspaper is the ideal substrate in this situation, as cleaning can be reduced to a manageable level. A small branch and water bowl should also be kept with the juvenile snake as this gives a place to sit and fresh water to drink respectively. A cardboard cylinder or a cave is a good idea when snakes are juveniles.