HUSBANDRY AND BREEDING OF THE BALL PYTHON *PYTHON REGIUS* IN THE TERRARIUM

By: Christine and Klaus Lehmann, Wielandstrasse 10, 4850 Weissenfels, G.D.R.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1979 I was fortunate to obtain two male and two female *Python regius*, which like all Pythons is protected and appears on list II of the Washington Convention.
This snake, originating from West and Central Africa, has a very attractive appearance. Its ground colour is goldish yellow, with irregular dark brown to black crossbars, in which there are often light blotches. On the supralabials there are four heat sensitive grooves on each side of the head, serving for the perception of warmblooded prey. Adult specimens can reach a total length of 1.5 m. Exceptional specimens of 2 m have been found. Males are smaller than females, so sex can be determined with specimens of equal age by growth rate. Females also have a tapering tail, while the base of the male's tail is somewhat thickened as a result of the presence of the hemipenes. One must be careful in judging, though, as just before defecating, the cloaca of the male is often swollen, which gives the impression it is a female. The surest way of determing sex, is probing. A rounded probe is brought in carefully sideways in the direction of the tail. In males the probe enters further than in females. There is no sexual dimorphism regarding the number of sub-

caudals or the length of the spurs.

BEHAVIOUR

When caught or disturbed, the Ball python curls up ball-like with its head in the curls, which explains its vernacular name. This passive defensive behaviour is not universal in the species: one of my animals does not curl up, but strikes vigorously.
As *Python regius* is relatively small and handsome, it would be a very suitable pet, if it were not such a specialized eater. Food accepting periods, occurring now and then, can be used by the keeper to feed extensively. Sometimes a preference appears for mice, rats or hamsters. Eventually, though seldom, newborn chickens are accepted. All in all, *Python regius* is a poor eater, that requires much time, knowledge and insight.

MY ANIMALS AND THE TERRARIUM

Both males, 1.17 m and 1.20 m long, and about 1250 g in weight, and both females, 1.30 and 1.40 m long, weighing respectively 2000 and 2300 g, are kept in a wooden cage of 120x60x60 cm (lxwxh). The waterbasin has a capacity of 15 l. To enlarge the living area, I made a platform above the basin. The walls are covered with plastered polystyrol. Peat dust is used as a substrate. A 40 Watt bulb, mounted in a ceramic flower pot, provides for light as well as for heat during the day. Daytime temperatures are 28-30^{0}C. During the night, a heating element of 15 Watt keeps the temperature at 24^{0}C.

THE BREEDING

Each year, from December to February, the snakes have copulated, but never laid any eggs.
In 1982 I imitated the wet and dry seasons of Western Africa, with apparent success. From December till March the snakes were kept totally dry, even without a filled waterbasin, having just a small water-tray. From June till August, a rain season was imitated by sprinkling the cage three times daily. During the remaining months the snakes were kept dry, but with a filled waterbasin.
One female's girth was growing, and she more and more laid on her back, as has been noted with other pregnant *Boidae*. In the evening of June 6th we saw her pushing away the peat with her coils, making a hole. The next morning we just saw the laying of the last egg. After this, she curled herself in tight windings pyramidically around the eggs. We did not notice muscle contractions, but the temperature between the eggs was about 33^{0}C, considerably above that of the surroundings.
Considering the available literature, we decided to take the eggs away and put them in an incubator. They had an average weight of 85-90 g, and were 7-7.5 cm long, with a diameter of 4.5-5 cm.
The incubator consisted of two refrigerator boxes, with ventilation holes in the sides and in the lid. The floor was covered with a layer of foam flakes with a thin layer of water. A heating element of 35 Watt provided a temperature of 29-33^{0}C.
Six clustered eggs were laid in box I, four loose eggs in box II. Despite a relative humidity of 100%, the eggs were shrivelling. We decided to half bury the eggs in box II in peat dust. Indeed, they swelled again. In order to be able to control the clustered eggs in box I, we did not bury them.

THE HATCHING

Relying on literature, we reckoned on an incubation period of 100 days. On August 3rd, though, 58 days after laying, one hatchling appeared, while two other eggs had slits. On August the 4th, the first hatchling, still half inside its shell, died. In the shell there was a large quantity of yolk left, weighing together with the shell 17 g. The two other hatchlings left their shells on August 4th. Their weight was 49 g, their length 38 cm. The empty shells weighed 3 g. The same day, one egg in box I showed a slit, The hatchling became visible on August 5th and left its shell on August 6th. It weighed 28 g, with a length of 33 cm. The shell with the yolk residue weighed 16 g. The same day a fifth hatchling left its egg. This one weighed 55 g and was 38 cm long. The sixth egg had been shrivelled from the start. When opened, it appeared to contain a properly developed but dead young. On August 5th there were slits in the eggs in box II, from which (contrary to the eggs in box I) some yolk dripped. On August 6th two heads appeared and the next day these two hatchlings left their shells. They weighed 65 g and were 38 cm long. The shells including the yolk residue weighed 8 and 10 g. I opened the third egg on August 9th. It contained a fully developed young, that hatched on August 13th. Egg number four had been swollen from the start, so I expected it to be infertile. On August 14th I opened it. Out of the slit dripped a clear fluid. As this did not smell badly, I left the egg in the incubator. After two hours, the eighth hatchling extended its head out of the egg.
This proved that all ten eggs had been fertile. The best incubating method proved to be burying the eggs in moist peat dust. All the eggs incubated in this manner, hatched, and the hatchlings were heavier than those of box I.

After 14 days, the first snakes shed their skins and accepted halfgrown mice.
We hope to be able to bring up the eight young snakes to adult size.
Finally we would like to thank Mr. Hügli (Switzerland) for his manyfold and valuable advice.