

BROWN HOUSE SNAKES AS PETS



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■ INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most important thing in keeping this or any other exotic as a captive is to know how, if not where, to find information on it. Certainly so short a work as this will not begin to cover everything. So, it is worth knowing, in this case, that this species is likely to be listed in more weighty sources as either *Boaedon fuliginosus* or *Lamprophis fuliginosus*. The most recent works I have encountered suggest further confusion in nomenclature is in the offing, but most commonly available sources list them under the subfamily *Lycodontinae*. These words will suffice to find you most of what is readily available.

■ HOUSING

These animals, while not among the flashier, are one of the hardier and more tractable snakes commonly offered in the pet trade. As with Corn Snakes — the popular North American animal — these snakes inhabit a large and diverse area in the wild. Some books have listed them as desert-dwelling, while others speak of them as proliferating in the leafy debris around village houses. The most consistent range given for them

in my search of the literature is all of Africa south of the Sahara Desert.

In the terrarium, a temperature range of 70 to 80° Fahrenheit should serve during the daytime, and you might want to drop that by 5 or so at night. They will bask if given the chance, and they like to climb some. Combining these two options with a support (stick, plastic toy or frame of some kind, rodent tubing, etc.) placed beneath a lamp for part or all of the day may also allow you a built-in temperature drop when you turn it off at night. As these guys do most of their roamin' in the gloamin', if not outright at night, they are unlikely to be much of a display during daylight hours except when basking, unless deprived of hiding places. I've noticed that they seem to think they're covered when peaking around the corner of a water dish, even though a foot and a half of their back ends may be exposed, but areas where they can completely withdraw will be used a lot. Most of mine show no interest in soaking on a regular basis, even when approaching a shed, but a covered water dish is more likely to be used than an exposed one. My own have rarely had any problem shedding, even without anything rougher than Aspen shavings to work against, so the presence or non of a rock is purely aesthetic and must be weighed against the level of ease with which the particular rock can be cleaned. Aspen shavings are the bedding I use,

myself, but a variety of others are workable (NOT CEDAR). Newspaper, while not pretty, works fine (I've been told a study showed the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal rank most others because of a higher (or better quality) fiber content.) Bottom heat is best for the majority of the temperature increase, as nocturnal animals generally gain their warmth from that absorbed by the surface they traverse rather than from any radiant overhead source. The pet trade abounds with bottom heaters, though I personally steer clear of the stick-on types simply because they limit your options. Whatever type you choose, you need to be able to set it up so that you have a full gradient through the ten degrees after the bedding is installed. Probably you will need to invest in a dimmer switch and/or thermostat to help in maintaining the right temperature. Many of these are available in the pet trade as well, if you're not comfortable about wiring up your own.

The nature and depth of the bedding will radically affect both the temperature a given heating element will achieve and how far it will spread before dissipating completely. Experimenting with different types on an unoccupied tank is a good idea if you have the opportunity. A tightly locking lid with no gaps bigger than an eighth of an inch square is a must for hatchlings, assuming you want to be a snake keeper. A 20 gal. long tank will suffice for virtually any specimen throughout its life, a 10 gal. for most males.

■ THE ANIMALS

Basics of housing dealt with, let's go on to the animals. Over most of its range, the Brown House snake does not usually exceed four feet. In parts of Natal, I guess five-footers are commonly seen. The males tend to be

about a foot shorter than the females and more than commensurately thinner. The dorsal colour varies quite dramatically, from red to almost black to olive green to a yellow-green and black again. In most cases, there is at least a hint of brown to justify the moniker. In all that I've seen, there is a pair of lines on the head, meeting in front of the eyes in the ubiquitous chevron. Also on the head, there is a stripe extending from the eye to the corner of the mouth, and a number of short ones below the lips. The chevron stripes end on or just behind the widest portion of the head, which is quite well set off from the neck, and, after a brief break, a lateral stripe on either side takes up as if in continuation. The width of this gap can be a quick identifier for similarly-sized cagemates. The lateral stripes extend between one and two thirds of the body length, and in many cases complete the dorsal pattern. Sometimes there is a reticulated pattern on the back, sometimes not, and sometimes it extends nearly to the vent, sometimes only over the neck. To make things more confusing, sometimes hatchlings have it for a few months, and then lose it, seemingly in a single shed, and sometimes it remains as a vestige that acts as highlights when the light is just right. Iridescence can frequently be detected, most prominently when opaque.

One animal in my own collection has a dorsal ground colour that almost exactly matches the yellow-green, off-butterscotch colour that is always, in my experience, the colour of the irises of the slit-pupiled eye. The venter is usually a plain cream to pink, though some specimens have a subcaudal midline stripe. Ventral colour usually extends two-to-three-and-a-half scale rows up the side, with spots of the dorsal colour on most scales in those rows. The females in my collection do not tend to more than an inch-to-an-inch-and-

a-half in diameter, none topping four feet, while the males only marginally best a half-inch and three feet is a big one.

■ THE DIET

Small mammals, small birds, lizards, and eggs constitute the wild diet set forth in every entry I've found, and appropriately sized mice, or small rats, comprise their captive diet in my room. Finding a compromise, if need be, between their willingness to continue and yours to offer food, and doing so at intervals of from five days to two weeks should work out well. Females will want meals more often than males - uh, than males do -, that is as they have either more growing to do or more bulk to maintain, as well as the occasional six-to-fifteen eggs to gestate. This needn't be any special occasion, you realize, as there is no brumating requisite for breeding this species and they will happily keep at it year round. If you don't plan to breed them, plan not to give them the opportunity, cause they will. One female I have laid five clutches before she needed to breed again, though the fifth had only one fertile egg in it, showing significant sperm storage capacity, and also laid seven clutches in the course of a year, an eighth coming only a week or three after the end of that time. The frequency seems to be a function of the amount of food they take in, which is almost entirely a question of how much you offer them. Two things the literature consistently cites on these critters are the prodigious meal-size they are capable of and the prolificness of their breeding capacity. I have two females whose first clutches each ran between 20 and 30 eggs, which is not supposed to happen according to anything I've read, though only one made it through hatching and another died with its tail still in the shell. All of the eggs in these two clutches

were of a size to make them insecure around a white jellybean, which is another anomaly, as the normal size is an inch to an inch and a half long and half that thick. None of my other females has gone more than eleven or twelve in a clutch. My females tend to insist on the same sort of setup as a nesting box that I use for incubating eggs, with the exception that they have to have adit and exit holes in the former, before they will lay their eggs.

Incubation should take anywhere from 50 to 100 days at 80-85° Fahrenheit, though some sources state a much more uniform 50-65. This I do on a bed of moist vermiculite with a topping of damp moss, starting the vermiculite with an equal weight of water and the moss (green decorative garden-variety moss) wet and wrung, and then mist the moss at intervals to keep the humidity up in the tub, on which I keep a lid that gets removed every day or two for ventilation purposes. To the vermiculite I seldom (but not never) add water, and never once the eggs start to shrink at the end of the incubation time, when venting becomes more necessary.

If you only plan to keep one, there is much to recommend the male of this species: first, there's less cage required; second, there's less cage to clean; third, proving the premise that you only get out of a thing what you put into it, there's less to clean out of the cage; and fourth, there's less rodent flesh to put into him than her. 'Nuff said?

For the most part, if treated decently, these serpents make good pets, if you don't expect a lot of daytime display or bright, contrasty colour schemes. Once they get past the hatchling panic thing, they frequently are content to take a grip (of which they all have surprising examples) on your hand or wrist and look around

when picked up, flicking curiously in numerous directions. This tenacity of grip makes them a match for the Corn Snake in climbing, though the latter has a topological advantage in the keeled edges of their belly scales.

They are aggressive feeders, and it may be best to feed them separately in order to not have to separate them feedingly. Two of them on the same mouse is a situation that can usually be dealt with by placing a drop of diluted tobasco sauce on the mouse right at the edge of one mouth or the other, and then carefully disengaging the one who lets go and removing him from the field. Most of the time it'll be an hour or two before the tobascoed critter decides to have another go at eating, but it's never been serious in my experience.

This should get you started, and you can look for other sources while enjoying your pet.

Lamprophis fuliginosus.



Photo by W. R. Brauch.