

BREEDING REPORT

MORELIA SPILOTA MCDOWELLI



Luciën,

*phone: +31-485-316319, The
Netherlands.*

■ GENERAL REMARKS

Morelia spilota mcdowelli, also known as the coastal carpet python, is found along the entire coastline of Australia (Barker and Barker, 1994). *Morelia spilota mcdowelli* is one of the largest of several forms (or subspecies) of carpet pythons; it can attain a length of well over 3 m. This species is as yet fairly unknown in The Netherlands. The lateral longitudinal stripes on both sides are characteristic of this species. The basic colours vary between light and dark brown whilst the eyes are black.

Because of its quiet and stable behaviour this snake is well suited as a terrarium animal. It also accepts dead prey - after getting used to it - without any problems.

■ HOUSING

I keep my breeding couple separated outside the mating season; each in a terrarium of 120 x 60 x 50 cm (lxwxh). The female is offered food whenever she wants. That means about 2 adult rats every 10 days. The male is only offered 1 adult rat every 3 weeks. In my experience the males are more ready to mate in this way than when they have been offered prey ad lib. This won't seem strange to many snake keepers.

Because I consider hygiene a priority for my snakes most of them are kept on newspaper, and these carpet pythons are no exception.

They are kept in a separate room where the temperature is controlled by two small electric heaters. One heater keeps the temperature at 26°C from 9:00 am until 7:00 pm. The second heater is set at 21°C, and is switched on automatically when the room falls to that temperature during the night. I fixed a small light of 40 Watt in each terrarium. This ensures that the snakes are able to find a warmer spot in the terrarium. Underneath this lamp the temperature is about 32°C. They enjoy using it especially after they have been fed. They have no opportunity to bathe because the drinking bowl is too small. In spite of my heating method the relative humidity is still always above 60%. According to several references it should be higher, but I have not had any bad experience as yet. All animals always slough their skin in one piece.

■ BREEDING

In February 1996 I placed the male with the female for the first time. However, they were not yet interested in each other. Little over a month later I found snake mites in one of my terraria. In order to prevent an eventual "mite-plague", I disinfected all terraria with Tugon which has the same effect as Neguvon. Furthermore, I put all animals individually for 12 hours

in a linen bag which had also been moistened with Tugon. When I took the *Morelia spilota mcdowelli* out of their bags and then placed them together, they were mating within an hour. These matings continued for four days, almost without interruption. When no other matings followed I separated the animals again. After about one week I put them together again, but without result. After I had separated them again, I offered the female a rat. This was refused. All the following attempts at feeding failed as well. From this I concluded, or rather hoped, the mating had been successful.

Some two months later a clear bulge was visible at the hind part of the female's body. When it was "sunning" itself underneath the lamp it was obvious she wanted to give the swollen part some extra warmth. Sometimes she manoeuvred her body so close to the lamp I was afraid it would be left with burns. Therefore, I changed the 40 Watt bulb for a 15 Watt and I placed a heating mat in the terrarium. The temperature reached about 35°C on this mat. Before the heating mat was put in she showed fairly constant behaviour. During the day she lay underneath the lamp and in the evening and for most of the night hidden in a polystyrene box filled with peat which I had put in the terrarium to give her a suitable place to lay the eggs. However, after the heating mat was installed, she lay on it all the time. She only left it when she wanted to drink.

After about two and a half months (around May 20) she changed her behaviour. She regularly left the place on the heating mat and crawled around the terrarium a lot. This kind of behaviour lasted a few days and I was beginning to worry whether she could find a place to lay her eggs. Finally, it all began on 28 May. In the evening I went in to see how she was doing and I saw a clutch of eggs lying underneath the heating mat. To prevent her damaging the eggs she had already laid I

carefully removed them from the terrarium. This didn't seem to disturb her at all, because ten minutes later there was another egg, and 15 minutes after that there was another one. This went on until she had laid a total of sixteen eggs.

The female continued to have contractions, but no more eggs were laid. Because she still had a bulge I gathered she must still have some eggs inside her. When she had failed to lay the eggs the following morning, I called in the help of a more experienced snake keeper. After a thorough check he was sure the eggs would not come out without help and he decided to massage them out by means of "local pressure". After two hours of sweating the last 6 eggs were massaged out which made the total number twenty-two.

■ THE INCUBATOR

I put the eggs in a "standard" incubator: a glass box with a little water in it, which was kept warm by means of an aquarium heater and a thermostat. The temperature was 30°C on average. During the day it was somewhat warmer, up to a maximum of nearly 31°C, at night it was a bit cooler with a minimum temperature of 28°C. I used moist peat as a substrate for the eggs. Within a few days I removed the 6 eggs from the stove that had been massaged out, because they had died. Some other eggs died because a green mould formed, other eggs went off for no obvious reason. I tried to minimize the green mould by dusting them with Norit powder. Unfortunately, this was not successful, probably because the mould on the eggs had already developed too far. After three weeks I had nine eggs left. On June 23 another egg died (the last one with green mould). When I opened the egg a small snake could be recognised. It was about 5 cm long and the head was relatively large in comparison to the rest of the body. Apart from the fact that the egg went bad,

Morelia spilota mcdowelli.



I was nevertheless pleased. The remaining eggs were at least fertilised! On July 1 another egg died (cause unknown). Then there were only seven.

■ BIRTH

The first young poked its head out of the egg on July 25 at 10:00 a.m. At about 16:00 hrs it had fully emerged from the egg. Three days later 4 young had hatched and I had good hopes for the three remaining eggs. Unfortunately, they quickly started to discolour and became dented. On opening the eggs I saw that the young - fully developed - were dead (cause unknown). The newborn young are beautifully red and are doing fine. I know that four young from twenty-two eggs is not too good, but it was my first breeding attempt with this species and I am nevertheless very pleased with it.

■ LITERATURE

- Barker D.G. and Barker T.M. (1994). *Pythons of the World. Volume I, Australia. The herpetocultural library. Advanced Vivarium Systems Inc., Lakeside, California, U.S.A.*

Translation from Dutch by Astrid Gomes.

English corrections by Chris Mattison.