

# **M**Y EXPERIENCES WITH **CORALLUS HORTULANUS HORTULANUS** **AND CORALLUS HORTULANUS COOKI**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In this article, I would like to describe how I became so enthusiastic about this species. At first, I will tell you something about the species and later on, I will tell you about some of my experiences with *Corallus hortulanus hortulanus* and *Corallus hortulanus cooki*. There will be things mentioned, which most readers will already know but I still thought they were a worthwhile contribution to this article.

## **THE FAMILY BOIDAE (GRAY 1825)**

The general features of boidae are: eyes with vertical elliptical pupils, narrow nostrils, many rows of scales around the body, narrow ventral scales, the presence of two fully developed lungs, they lack small teeth on the premaxilla (the pythons still contain these), the pelvis is rudimentary for hind legs (you can find these on each side of the cloacal opening, the so called spurs). In male animals, you can see these spurs very clearly, in female animals these spurs are very small and sometimes difficult to see.

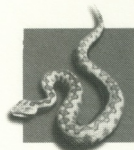


*Corallus hortulanus hortulanus*. Breeder: T. Simon, Kirchen (Germany).

Photo by A. Bening.



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**CORALLUS (DAUDIN 1803)**

*Corallus* species are mostly arboreal boas, with the head very distinct from the neck, the tail moderately long and prehensile. The anterior teeth are long and curved. The labials are deeply pitted and contain heat-sensitive pits, which can detect temperature variations of 0.025°C.

***CORALLUS HORTULANUS HORTULANUS* (LINNAEUS 1758)  
AND *CORALLUS HORTULANUS COOKI* (GRAY 1842)**

Which name must be used is a problem on its own. Is it *Corallus hortulanus* or is it *Corallus enydris*. When Linnaeus described this species in 1758, he described *hortulanus* and *enydris* on the exact same page. The classic catalogs of the last century used *hortulanus* in preference to *enydris*. The name was changed to *enydris* in 1935 by a man named Strull. Linnaeus described *enydris* on line 32 of the page and he mentioned *hortulanus* on line 36. Strull based his choice for *enydris* on the basis of what used to be called line priority. However, on this subject, there are many discussions and I did not want to bore you with them. Eventually they chose *hortulanus*.



*Corallus hortulanus hortulanus*. Breeder: G. Hollander, Baanbrugge (The Netherlands).  
Photo by A. Bening.

This boa is a slender tree boa with a wide head on a small neck. The nasal scales are in contact with each other.

This snake is one of the most variable in colour. Generally, adults are yellowish to greyish brown, with many small oval dark spots down the centre of the back. The belly is greyish yellow to whitish, with few or many dark blotches. Occasionally there are bright red colours in the pattern and the dorsal circles may be outlined with bright red or yellow. The top of the head is heavily marked with blackish irregular lines in most specimens, with distinct dark stripes running back from the eye to the corner of the mouth.

Adults commonly are a meter in length. The maximum length is about 2,5 meters. The tail is 15-20% of the total length. *Corallus hortulanus* ranges from Costa Rica (and Nicaragua?) in Central America over most of northern South America, South Bolivia and South Brazil. It also occurs in the Guiana's, Venezuela and Colombia, plus Trinidad and Tobago. Additionally, it is common in the Windward Islands of the southern Caribbean, St.-Vincent and Grenada and the Grenadines.

There are two subspecies: *Corallus hortulanus hortulanus* and *Corallus hortulanus cooki*. By counting the dorsal scales, you can say if your dealing with *Corallus hortulanus hortulanus* or *Corallus hortulanus cooki*. *Corallus hortulanus hortulanus* >50 and *Corallus hortulanus cooki* <50.

name scales	hort. hort.	cooki
Dorsal scales (in rows)	(47,4)>50-63	39-<50 (48)
Ventrals	270-299	257-278
Subcaudals	105-137	100-122

A table of fundamental characteristics of *Corallus hortulanus*

Rarely a specimen of *Corallus hortulanus hortulanus* will have 47 or 48 dorsal scale rows.

## WHY DID I CHOOSE CORALLUS?

It all started with a picture of *Corallus hortulanus* in a book by Chris Mattison. The snake fascinated me by its looks and the power in its eyes. Since I did not have any experience with keeping snakes, I first started keeping Elaphe species. However, true love never dies and my love for tree snakes was there from the start.

Like every other year, I had free tickets for the Snake-day organised in the Netherlands by the European Snake Society. This meeting was on 3 October in 1998. At first, I just went there to buy some literature but I couldn't find anything suitable. What I did find were *Morelia viridis* and *Corallus hortulanus* in different colours. They sold *Corallus hortulanus* on several tables. They told me that it is difficult to get these snakes eating spontaneously. Secondly it does have a bad temper. Despite all these warnings, I bought a pair of *Corallus hortulanus*.

## HUSBANDRY

These animals are mainly jungle animals and therefore live mostly in trees, sometimes at great heights. The temperature during the daytime is about 28°C and during the night 20°Celsius. Considering these factors I built them their cage. The measurements are: 40x60x40cm and heated to the temperatures I mentioned before. This cage is only for when they are young till semi-adult. When they reached beyond semi-adult, they are provided with a new environment, that also contains better conditions in consideration of pregnancy.

Inside the cage, there are bamboo leaves, branches and Philodendron plants (this is to keep the humidity



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at 70-85%) and a substrate from wood shavings. Light bulbs from 25-40W heat the cages and are controlled with a dimmer and a time clock. I do not need heating cables, because I have central heating in the house.

**MY ANIMALS**

The animals were, when I bought them,  $\pm$  6 weeks old. All my snakes are kept in pairs, so are the *Corallus*. The snakes looked healthy and kept up their reputation of being an aggressive snake. As I mentioned before the dorsal colour and belly colour can be very variable. The head looks big on that slender neck. The mouth contains long curved teeth that can penetrate deeply in the prey. These teeth can also penetrate me. My hand sometimes looked like a pincushion. All *Corallus hortulanus* species have heat sensitive pits that can make them detect temperature variations of 0.025°C. This is how they can localise their prey so accurately.

*Corallus hortulanus* is nocturnal and therefore sleeps during daytime. The eye looks like a cats eye and indicates that they are nocturnal creatures. My adult animals have a greenish dorsal colour with an orange diamond pattern on the back and the eyes are yellow. My other *Corallus hortulanus* are yellow with a bright red outlined pattern and an orange specimen!

**A WEIRD PHENOMENOM**

After I brought these animals back from Houten (where I bought them), I left them in their cages. At first, they did not want to come out of their hiding box. So I thought, I'll give them a hand. When I took the female out of the hiding box she turned on her back and died. I went to tell my girlfriend about this and when I returned after about

30 minutes, I saw her lying on a branch. This was the first time that I had seen this phenomenon. I had read about this in other species, but never from *Corallus*. I always thought that *Corallus* species would rather attack than play dead, when they felt threatened. The male showed the same behaviour on several occasions, mainly when he noticed me watching him eating.

**THEIR FOOD AND HOW TO FEED THEM**

After letting the snakes get adapted to their cages, I went for the first feeding attempt. The literature says that *Corallus hortulanus* when they are young eat mostly *Anolis* sp. or young birds. When they get older they will also eat rodents and birds. For me I tried feeding them with 'fuzzy's'.

The first attempt was a disaster. They would only strike at their prey out of aggression. When after some time, they bit into the prey, they were just not interested anymore and would just let go! I tried many times but it always went like this. Probably they felt threatened by the prey or tweezers and therefore did not eat the prey!

I stopped trying to feed them for some time because I thought it would become too stressful for them. The male remained very quiet after trying to feed him. This reassured me. The female reacted the same way. After I had called someone for advice (two know more than one!) I was told that maybe the smell of mice did not attract the *Corallus*. I was advised to rub the mice with a young chicken. After considering this option I thought I would keep this option as the final attempt, because when you start with this rubbing procedure how long must you keep on doing this! After 3 weeks of trying to feed them on mice, I made a call to the trader I had



*Corallus hortulanus hortulanus*. Breeder: mr. Janssons, Den Bosch (The Netherlands). Photo by A. Bening.



*Corallus hortulanus hortulanus*. Breeder: R. Winkler, Zoeterwoude (The Netherlands). Photo by A. Bening.

**MY EXPERIENCES WITH *CORALLUS HORTULANUS HORTULANUS*  
AND *CORALLUS HORTULANUS COOKI***



bought them from, for some advice. He gave me these options:

- Don't feed them on large prey, try feeding with 'pinkies' and offer them with long tweezers; this was my first mistake, my 'fuzzy's' were probably too big;
- Feed them late at night or during dusk;
- Only try feeding the snakes when you can approach them from below. This was my second mistake because I had approached them from the side or from above. I should have known that their natural enemies also come from above;
- When the snake has caught its prey and it is coiling around it, let the prey go and don't move.
- Throw a dead mouse in some boiling water, this will give the mouse a very strong scent which can persuade the snake to eat. Sometimes the mouse still has to be pierced to attract the snake.

Despite all these options, you still have to be very patient and even then, *Corallus* can regurgitate its prey. When this happens, keep trying!

I also spoke to Mr. Abuys about this problem. Mr. Abuys is someone who studied *Corallus* in its own habitat for several years and bred with these species for about ten years. He also told me that a full grown *Corallus* never eats its prey on the ground and that, after it strangled it, he will carry it with the prehensile tail to a quiet place and then start to eat. I have also observed this many times with my own animals.

After many attempts and many telephone calls, I managed to get all my *Corallus* eating. And they are still eating very well!

## CONCLUSION

It was all worth it, setting the clock in the middle of the night, being pierced, etc. I wished I had started

keeping these snakes earlier. Their behaviour is fascinating and I find it challenging to keep them. I learned to handle them with their aggressive nature and I enjoy them changing colour when they grow older. In the future I would like to keep other *Corallus* species like *Corallus caninus* and *Sanzinia* species.

I have counted the scales of one of my snakes. I counted them from a shedding (these are thus not very accurate) with the following result:

name	numbers
Subcaudals	± 125
Ventrals	± 273
Dorsal rows	± 44
Anal scales	divided

It turned out to be a *Corallus hortulanus cooki*. You can find a nice picture, which really looks like one of my *Corallus hortulanus cooki*, in: 'Kaleidoscopic Tree Boas' by Stafford and Henderson — Plate 10. I'm planning to count the scales of all my snakes in the future. I'll let you know the results in a following article.

## LITERATURE

Robert Henderson. Article from the Internet: 'Reptiles and Amphibians - The Kaleidoscopic Tree Boa: *Corallus enydris* in the West Indies'

R.W. Henderson. 'A Taxonomic Review of the *Corallus hortulanus* Complex of Neotropical Tree Boas'

R.W. Henderson and P.J. Stafford. 'Kaleidoscopic Tree Boas'

J.G. Walls. 'The living Boas — A Complete guide to the boas of the world'

Articles by: A. Abuys. *Lacerta* nr. 12 — 46e year, September 1988.

A. Abuys. *Lacerta* nr. 2. — 48e year, December 1989-1990.

Chris Mattison. 'A-Z of Snake-keeping'

## THANKS

I would like to thank Mr. Abuys and K. Hoppe for their time and knowledge!

## MY NEXT ARTICLES

My next article will be about more experiences I had with these snakes, detailed information about their cages and their humidity, temperature, scale counts and some breeding results.

## WHERE YOU CAN FIND ME

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