snake breeder

The International Newsletter for Snake Enthusiasts

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FREE COPIES AND SUBSCRIPTIONS

Readers are invited to submit articles on any aspect of snake keeping and breeding whether they be crisply laser printed or hastily scribbled on the back of a cornflakes packet. Instead of offering money (which you would only squander anyway) we will send you five free copies of the issue containing your article and extend your subscription.

NEW SUBSCRIPTIONS AND RENEWALS

Thank you to the following people who have recently subscribed or renewed their subscriptions to snake breeder.

R Fletcher, N Cass, P Graham, C Hindley, S Scrowston, C Blacker, W Plews, S Sharp, C Chivers, C Hayward, P & O Miles, J Hollingsworth, T Burgess, P Thompson, SRAS & M Wootten.

Moderate- to Large-Scale Rearing of Hatchling Snakes

by Kevin J Hingley and Mark Hemmings

Both authors have moderate-sized collections of snakes when viewed individually; the combined collections, however, result in a relatively large number of snakes of approximately 15 species. The majority are colubrid snakes of the genera *Elaphe*, *Lampropeltis*, *Pituophis* and *Lamprophis*, although three different genera of boids are also maintained.

Depending upon size, the adults are housed in individual vivaria of suitable sizes and, up until fairly recently, any subsequent offspring were maintained in small plastic boxes in large, heated vivaria. Advances in herpetological technology and the advent of heating equipment such as the Jemp heating cable (marketed as Creature Comforts) has led to a rethink in the rearing of our offspring prior to sale or exchange. The heated shelf system is now employed in the rearing of hatchlings of all the species we breed.

The heated shelves are made of Contiplas 'Keyboard', a melamine-coated chipboard, in the form of a 'bookcase', with narrow shelves between which plastic food containers are sandwiched. The heating cable is just over six metres in length and has an output of 75 watts; this is placed at the rear of each shelf, being threaded through pre-drilled holes at each end of the unit to allow the cable to run along each shelf and go up onto the next level. A little maths is required to ensure that the cable is long enough for the number of shelves which can be heated. We have found that a six metre (20') 75 watt cable will comfortably heat five shelves approximately one metre long and 15 cms apart. This unit was purpose-built for a specific size of plastic food box. The unit houses 45 such food boxes which measure approximately 12.5 x 10 x 7.5cms (lxwxh). To avoid direct contact with the heat cable two wooden runners are fixed to each of the shelves and the cable is situated in the rear of the trench created by these runners.

This type of unit is best built once the keeper has decided on the size of plastic box to be used, preferably using boxes of the same size (at least on each shelf). By restricting the shelf length to a metre or less and placing a number of boxes on the very bottom shelf (with wooden runners affixed) the position of the next shelf can be determined by placing this on top of the boxes and marking the sides of the unit, then drilling and securing this with screws. This process is repeated until all or nearly all of the heating cable's length is taken up. You must remember to allow for a reasonable curvature at opposing ends of the unit so that the cable is not stretched tight and in danger of malfunctioning. Wooden runners have to be placed on each shelf's upper side before the height between the shelves with the plastic boxes in place can be determined. The height between the shelves is dependent upon the actual height of the boxes used and the depth of the runners. Only

basic wood-working skills are required though and if the holes for the cable to pass through are drilled as each shelf is fixed a piece of string can be used to determine how many shelves the unit will require.

The heat output of the cables is quite gentle and only the rear of the box is heated, allowing the occupant of each box to thermo-regulate. The boxes will need ventilation and this can be achieved using a small drill or a hot fork around the sides of each box. The temperature in each box directly above the cable is approximately 27° C although this fluctuates slightly with variations in the room temperature. The unit does not have to have a back if it is placed against an interior wall, although such a back (usually of hardboard) would allow heat to be retained a little more effectively. For even greater heat retention the unit could be designed to include a large sliding-glass front although we have not found this to be necessary, even on cooler days. For cost-effectiveness this type of unit operates best when all the shelves are filled with boxes, even though these may be empty following the sale of youngsters.

More precise control over these heat cables can be achieved by connecting them to a dimmer switch or thermostat of some description. To calibrate such a device it will be necessary to place a thermometer in at least one box on each shelf level and take readings of what each position on the dimmer switch/thermostat relates to in terms of approximate temperature.

The initial cost may appear to be high - around £20 for the heat cable, £10 for wood materials/screws, £5 to £40 for a dimmer switch or thermostat and 50p to £2 for each plastic container (unless unwanted food containers, such as ice-cream tubs, are to be re-used). However if you intend to breed snakes annually and in fairly large numbers the unit can be used year after year without additional cost (other than electricity consumption and unless the electrical equipment becomes faulty and has to be repaired or replaced). The actual cost of our first unit was £45 and it housed 45 snakes, cheap in anyone's book. Compare this to the cost of building a large heated vivarium containing innumerable 'pet boxes' at £2 to £3 each and it really speaks for itself.

Alternative methods of heating each shelf could be employed but again this may prove cost-inhibitive and some of the larger wattage heaters may prove to be too hot even when thermostatically controlled. The single largest advantage is that temperate and tropical snakes can be raised in each unit side by side without any apparent ill-effects.

A number of books published in recent years contain diagrams which illustrate the building of these systems and if you're a dab hand at d.i.y., who knows what you could achieve.

On a larger scale and using the increasingly popular heat pads or heat tape on much wider shelves to accommodate larger plastic boxes, even adults of small to medium species can be kept in this manner.

Brief Notes on Unusual Mating and Egg-laying in Burmese Pythons

by Ray Cimino

The following is a brief summary of unexpected activities with two separate pairs of Burmese Pythons (*Python molurus bivittatus*), one involving unexpected egg-laying, the second involving unexpected mating.

Case One

In September 1990 I purchased a pair of Burmese Pythons, the male was approximately 11' long and the female was 13'. They came from separate sources. Both were tame and fed well.

The snakes were housed together in a 6' x 3' x 2' vivarium, heated by a 250 watt ceramic heater and a large heatpad.

In December the female snake developed a slight respiratory infection. The vivarium temperature was raised with the addition of an extra ceramic heater but there appeared to be little improvement in her condition. A course of oxytetracycline was administered intra-muscularly at the correct dosage which led to a temporary improvement but another course of treatment was administered in February. This too failed to cure the condition. The snake, meanwhile, had ceased to feed from late December. During all this time there was no change in photoperiod or any real drop in temperature.

Imagine my surprise when, at 7pm on March the 17th (St. Patrick's Day) I discovered she had laid a large clutch of eggs! Although the female was tame I waited for another Burmese Python keeper to call at 8pm before I tried to remove her from the eggs. She was aggressive but didn't attempt to bite.

Many of the eggs had already started to collapse in the arid atmosphere. There were 43 in all but six of these were a lot smaller and probably infertile. The rest were set in Vermiculite and placed in a separate vivarium. One egg was opened and found to be fertile. Most recovered but a strike by electricity workers and power cuts four weeks later resulted in the loss of all eggs.

There had been no mating or mating-related behaviour ever seen and this would have been noticed as the snakes were kept in my living room and are observed many times each day. The female had fasted since mid-December but I had put this down to her infection. Perhaps her resistance to the antibiotic was due to her gravid condition. Perhaps her gravidity was a result of sperm retention from another, much earlier mating.

Case Two

A female Burmese Python, approximately 6'6" in length, was obtained in September 1990. I had planned to sell her but, due to her exceptional colour and markings, as well as her aggressive nature, I decided to hold on to her for a while longer.

In a general reshuffle of vivaria in January I temporarily placed her in a 4' aquarium with a vivarium lid. However the books I placed on

top of the lid were not heavy enough. She escaped overnight and stayed up the chimney (at least I presume that is what happened as I searched everywhere else) for five weeks before I managed to catch her on the floor near the grate. I received a savage bite in the process but I was glad to recapture her.

The male Burmese Python was a snake of a different colour (literally and metaphorically). I heard about him through a friend and when I went to see him in a private house in October I was appalled at the state he was in. Grossly under weight, cold, (a 25 watt light bulb simply does not heat a large aquarium set beside a window) and, worst of all, brain-damaged from this treatment. He was totally incapable of any head or body co-ordination. I asked no questions, held back my anger and just got him out of there as quickly as I could.

I could find nothing in my large-enough personal library about what to do in such a situation. I have bought, sold or exchanged almost 200 snakes during my 18 months in the hobby so I felt justified in taking a little initiative.

I placed the 6'7" python in a 24" x 18" x 18" vivarium with a bulb, a 17" heatpad and a simple branch. The snake had no option but to have most of his body on or above the heatpad. Temperatures reached 97° F during the day and dropped to 82°F at night. Water was offered several times a day but not left in the cage for obvious reasons of humidity.

After eight days the snake was taken by a friend and kept under similar conditions.

After 10 to 11 days the snake had fully recovered in terms of co-ordination and conditions were changed back to the norm for a Burmese Python. However the snake persistently refused all food, by February had become very thin and force-feeding was initiated. Intensive veterinary attention was to follow but that is the subject of another story.

In late March my friend agreed to babysit the earlier-mentioned female python. It was placed with the male. Bearing in mind the two snakes' backgrounds I didn't expect anything unusual to happen. The male was extremely thin, highly stressed by constant force-feeding, injections and x-raying, though still extremely placid. (In fact he is the only snake I have ever heard of which will actually follow people (females) from room to room. I didn't believe it until I saw it!)

On the 3rd of April and on and off for a further eight days the male proceeded to mate with the female. Should the mating prove fertile I'm hoping that the offspring will have the good looks of their mother and the temperament of their father.



The Long or Short Pregnancy of a Honduran Boa

by Pauline Kite

Last August one of my Honduran Boas developed a bulge just over halfway along the length of her body. She had been housed with two males from April until the beginning of July 1990 but no mating had been observed. The snake yawned a lot and was seen to jump on several occasions. She started hissing at the other females and so was housed on her own.

In September she ate four unweaned rats and a medium-sized rat was eaten in November. Her lump continued to grow. She would glide gracefully along the floor, get to the lump, stop, lift it off the ground, pull the rest of her body along, put the lump down and slide off again.

In the middle of November she became very restless and stressed and was put in with another pair of snakes that were mating. She settled down and curled up with them. She was observed mating for several hours on the 24th and 27th of November and again on the 13th of December. On the 15th of December she moved away from the other snakes and began hissing at them. She was put back in her own tank. She continued yawning and jumping and her scales started to look very stretched for about 12". Even her back scales were separating but the rest of her body looked only slightly fuller than normal.

January and February 1991 passed, March came and went, then in April her lump seemed to get smaller and she found it easier to move around. She became very aggressive and would hiss violently if I just looked at her. On the morning of the 15th I changed her water bowl, much to her annoyance. I checked her around lunchtime and her temper had not improved. When I next looked in at 3pm she had given birth to nine live babies, one dead and three infertile eggs.

I took the snake to the vet on the 22nd of April and she was tube fed with Complan as her weight had dropped from her normal 4½kg to 2½kg. She had not shed her skin since the 1st of August 1990. Her eyes clouded on the 26th of April and she was tube fed again on the 29th of April. On the 2nd of May she shed her skin at last: one layer, very hard and rough but a perfect slough. An hour later she ate a small rat. Since then she has continued to feed well and has regained most of her weight loss.

The snake's vivarium is heated with a central ceramic heater giving a thermal gradient from 80° F at the ends of the cage rising to 90° F in the centre. Light is provided by a 40 watt spotlight. The temperature drops by about 6°F at night.

The boa was formerly called 'George' but this has now been lengthened to 'Georgina'. She is approximately 6' in length and her colouring is reddish-brown with paler brown ovals. Her flanks are pinky grey. The male she mated with in November 1990 is just over 5' long and weighs 3½kg. His colouring is very similar to hers although his markings are less distinct. He was sexually active from late September 1990 to the end

of March 1991 and he ate very little during this period. He is now feeding again, on three-quarter pound rabbits.

My three female Honduran Boas are between 5' and 5½' and are mainly black/grey. The other male, again black/grey, is over 6' in length. He will only eat rats. He was sexually active from February 1991 until the end of April. Although matings were observed on several occasions with both males and the three females these have, so far, been unsuccessful.



EVENTS

Items for inclusion in this column are welcome and should include time, date, venue and a contact telephone number.

13th July **11am - 5pm**

Thames and Chiltern Herpetological Group Annual Exhibition 1991
West Herts College
Watford Campus
Hempstead Road
Watford
Herts

Enquiries to (0734) 833532.

28th July **10am - 5.30pm**

Welsh Independent Society of Herpetologists Show
Margam Park
Port Talbot
West Glamorgan

Enquiries to Keith and Iris on (0792) 321282.

2nd/3rd/4th August

PRAS Display
Southsea Show
Southsea Common

Enquiries to Jon on (0329) 833017.

31st August/ Sat 10am - 7pm
1st September Sun 10am - 6pm

PRAS Annual Show
Fratton Community Centre
Trafalgar Place
off Clive Road
Fratton, Portsmouth

Enquiries to Jon on (0329) 833017

15th September **10.15am - 4pm**

IHS Reptile Fair 1991
Sports Hall
Alumwell Centre
Primley Avenue
Walsall
West Midlands

Contact the IHS at 65 Broadstone Avenue, Walsall, West Midlands WS3 1JA.

19th October 1991
Dutch Snake Day

Enquiries to Guido Gomes on 079-416592 (The Netherlands).

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Dear **snake breeder**,

I read with surprise the article 'It's Only Natural' by Chris and Marcia Martin (**sb** 5/91) in which they describe and advise others on how a vivarium should be set up.

The first four paragraphs give a good insight into snake keeping and the problems encountered in the good old days when anyone keeping reptiles was regarded as a weirdo!

In paragraph five they explain the dangers of sliding-glass doors and how snakes can become trapped by overlapping panes of glass. Surely this is nothing more than bad planning by the keeper in buying (or making) a vivarium with a gap between the glass large enough for the snake to fit into? The Martins then mention injuries snakes may receive when closing the doors. Surely simply keeping a watch when the doors are closed solves that problem? (If sliding-glass doors are so dangerous why does Mr Martin sell sliding-glass door locks?)

The Martins then mention their favourite subject, stress, which a lot of people suffer reading their articles. What would your reaction be if you were a snake curled up, asleep, and suddenly a tremendous vibration shook the ground you were resting on as the heavy lid of the top-opening vivarium slips from your keeper's fingers as the vivarium is being closed and crashes down? When the lid flattens your head, stress will be the least of your problems.

The authors then move on to the grabbing-hand problem. No-one likes to be bitten (even by harmless snakes). Most keepers I know place their hand carefully in the vivarium and let the snake identify the 'intruder' before attempting to handle the animal. This may not alleviate stress but it certainly helps to reduce it.

Finally the Martins bring up the light bulb saga...yawn, enough said! (See *Snake Keeper*, Volume 3.)

Mr & Mrs Martin have some good ideas and obviously do a good deal of research. If they are so concerned about stress and know full well that snakes spend a lot of time hiding from their predators, why do they house their Corn Snakes in vivaria furnished with only a single branch, a water bowl and newspaper substrate? What could be more stressful?

Yours sincerely,

I Henderson
Bucks

*****

Dear Mr Connolley,

I'm sorry to say that I will no longer be ordering **snake breeder** because it just isn't the same anymore. When the project was started (*Snake*

Keeper, Volume 1) it was terrific but it hasn't measured up since. I hung in as long as I could but Royal Python articles, although very nice and informative... How many can you take? The only people offering articles are Chris and Marcia Martin.

Good luck,

M Tashman
New York

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No. 3 Asian Rat Snakes, Part XIII, Elaphe moellendorffi ♦ Encounters with European Snakes, Part II ♦ Various Problems with Garter Snakes ♦ Some Notes and Reminiscences on the Royal Python, Python regius, in Ghana and Elsewhere.

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No.11 Asian Rat Snakes, Part XV, Elaphe davidi ♦ Fascination in a Serpentine Form - The Garter Snake, Thamnophis sirtalis parietalis ♦ Breeding the Florida Kingsnake, Lampropeltis getulus floridana ♦ The Structural Maintenance of the Reptile Aquarium, Part I.

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Garter Snake hatchlings for sale. **Florida Blue-sided** (*Thamnophis sirtalis similis*) £12 each. **Plains Garter Snakes** (*Thamnophis radix ssp.*) £10 each. Phone George on (0475) 87002 (Renfrewshire).

Hatchling **California Kingsnakes** (*Lampropeltis getulus californiae*) banded, well-marked, unrelated pairs available £35 each. Also surplus mature, banded, male **California Kingsnake** £80 or exchange for male, albino, banded **California Kingsnake**. Phone Henry or Fiona on (0203) 442054 after 6pm from 27th July.

Six large female **Royal Pythons**, £45 each or exchange breeding-age female **Carpet Python** (*Morelia spilotes*). Phone (0702) 205742 (Essex).

Good home required for female **Green Iguana**, approximately three years old and 3' long. Very good condition, £75, Phone Neil on (0494) 464323 (Bucks).

Common Boas (*Boa constrictor ssp.*), captive-bred, born June 1991, nicely marked, healthy youngsters, £80 each or £150 pair. Coastal-phase **California Kingsnakes** (*Lampropeltis getulus californiae*), large hatchlings from unrelated parents, £30 each. **Leopard Geckos**, superb healthy babies, really cute, £10 each. Phone Barry on (0908) 370112 (Bucks).

Carolina Corn Snakes. Hatchlings £15 each. Phone (0349) 271500 (Suffolk).

Female **Green Iguana**. Tame, captive-bred, 3' long. Three years old. Plus vivarium and accessories. Telephone (0442) 214771 (Herts).

Cheltenham-bred baby boas (*Boa constrictor constrictor*). Born 13th May at 8am, £75 each. Available soon **Burmese Pythons** (*Python molurus bivittatus*), eggs laid 15th May, £47.50p each, hatching date end of July. Vivarium equipment - ceramic heater units (trough and conical), Ultratherm heat mats, heat strips, Sunlight systems, thermostats (mechanical and electronic), True-lites and UV, Powerfilters plus numerous other items including sliding glass door locks £2.95p plus p&p. Locks can be supplied 'all to pass' (one key operates all locks) or 'all to differ' (different keys supplied for each lock). For price list please send an sae to Chris Martin, 18 Ballinode Close, Cheltenham, Gloucs GL50 4SQ. Telephone (0242) 573477.

Egyptian Spotted Sand Boas, *Eryx jaculus jaculus*, (unrelated pairs, yellow or orange, second generation due). Captive-bred **Colombian Rainbow Boas**, *Epicrates cenchria maurus* (unrelated pairs). **Argentine Rainbow Boas**, *Epicrates cenchria alvarezi* (first and second generation unrelated pairs, shortly to be listed on CITES Appendix 1). Contact Steven Simpson on (0273) 727328 (Sussex).

WANTED

Any information on keeping or breeding Rainbow Boas (*Epicrates cenchria maurus*). Please write to Mr P Thompson, 80 Chadwick Road, Woodthorpe, Sheffield S13 8DB or phone (0742) 760444 (10am to 4pm).