



Handle with care

Royal or ball python

Species: Royal or ball python
Scientific name: *Python regius*

Description

The royal or ball python is a heavy-bodied snake with tan or yellow-buff blotches on a black or dark chocolate brown background. Other colour morphs, such as piebald, albino and golden are available. Hatchlings are about 20cm long, with adults growing to about 1-1.5m. When a royal python is frightened, it coils into a tight ball with its head in the centre, which is why it is also known as the ball python.

Royal pythons can live for more than 40 years (47 years have been recorded). Knowledge of the specialist care of these animals has improved, which could explain why in the past their lifespan in captivity was reported to be 20 to 30 years.

Life in the wild

Royal pythons are found in the savannah and semi-arid areas of West and Central Africa. They are mainly nocturnal and can climb trees but, because of their secretive nature, will often hide among tree roots and in low vegetation in the wild.

Source of animals

Royal pythons on sale as pets are either wild-caught animals ranched (term used to describe wild-caught animals taken into captivity to breed with the resulting offspring bred or exported) in countries where they are found in the wild and then imported into the UK, or animals that have been bred in captivity. Take care to check that the animal on sale has been bred in captivity in the UK and not been taken from the wild. Buying a python that has been bred in captivity in the UK can help you to establish contact with the breeder who is a keeper with experience of caring for this species of snake in this country. Buying a UK-bred python also means you will not be supporting or encouraging the trade in wild animals. In addition to the impact on wild populations, wild caught snakes are likely to have far more parasites than captive-bred animals.

Prior knowledge and preparation

Before acquiring a snake, it is crucial that any potential keeper finds out about the animal – including how to provide for the animal's needs when kept in captivity, how big it gets and how long it lives. Only then can the keeper make an informed decision about whether s/he can provide the specialist care and captive environment required, and has the facilities, time, financial means and long-term commitment to maintain a good standard of care. The keeper can then acquire suitable accommodation, food and the necessary accessories, and prepare the enclosure to ensure the captive environment is stable before taking the animal home. This also gives the novice keeper time to locate and to talk to relevant experienced keepers and professionals for further advice such as a vet with experience of treating the species, and specialist UK organisations that keep this species in captivity.

Vet care/costs/holiday cover

Snakes need specialist handling and treatment. Your veterinary surgeon will advise on the costs of consultations for royal pythons. Your snake will need to be looked after properly every day, including the time that you are away. Ask your vet for details of reputable reptile groups in the area and boarding establishments, or leave your snake in the care of a friend who fully understands its needs.

Unhealthy/healthy animal signs

A healthy python will 'taste' the air frequently and rapidly with its tongue. Its body will feel firm and muscular. Its skin will be smooth and its vent free of faeces or wetness. Lumps on the skin, nasal discharge, open-mouthed breathing and wheezing can all indicate an unhealthy snake. Cloudy eyes can be a sign of ill health, but it can also mean that the snake is simply shedding its skin. A snake's mouth should close properly and its saliva should be clear. Mucus that is cloudy or lumpy (looking like cottage-cheese) is a sign of mouth rot, as is redness or spots of haemorrhaging on the mucous membrane. Snakes should also be checked for external parasites, such as ticks and mites (they look like moving black dots), in particular on and under scales, around the eyes and in the mouth and nostril area.

Health issues to find out about

- Anorexia
- Burns from incorrect lighting and heating
- Inability to shed (slough) skin
- Respiratory infections
- Internal parasites
- External parasites
- Mouth rot
- Dehydration
- Bone disease

Why are royal pythons vulnerable in captivity?

Snakes are completely dependent upon their keepers to provide them with the correct accommodation, heating, humidity, lighting and food, all of which must reflect as closely as possible their wild habitat. Without correct care, snakes will suffer from conditions such as mouth rot and bone disease, which may eventually cause death. Adequate ventilation is important to stop the snake developing respiratory problems. The correct humidity is also key in preventing respiratory problems, blister skin disease and problems when the snake sheds its skin. Incorrect lighting and heating, or not using protective guards to stop the snake from having direct contact with heat sources, can result in severe burns to a snake's skin. Anorexia in snakes is most common with royal pythons and can be a sign of a sick snake, poor husbandry or the provision of unsuitable food or poor presentation of the prey. Consult a veterinary surgeon if the snake does not feed at all or for prolonged periods.

Handling/transporting the animal home

Hands should always be washed before and after handling the snakes or cleaning their enclosure, to reduce the risk of picking up and spreading bacteria such as *Salmonella*. Washing hands after handling food items can stop the handler smelling like a prey species, which could prevent the snake from treating your hand like food. Snakes should not be handled when shedding their skin, as this can cause stress to the snake and they may behave aggressively if they cannot see very well. A royal python can be transported in a thick cloth bag that does not have any holes and is secured tightly at the open end. Depending on the size of the snake, a thick pillowcase or duvet cover can also be used if securely tied at the open end. The bag should then be put in a secure ventilated box with shredded newspaper for insulation and cushioning, which is especially important for longer journeys that may take several hours. The temperature should be kept at 21–24°C.

Needs: grouping, diet, accommodation and environment

Royal pythons are solitary in the wild so in captivity they should be housed alone, except when snakes are put together to breed. The snakes will need a glass-fronted vivarium with sides made of fibreglass, moulded plastic or melamine with a secure, tight-fitting sliding door. The vivarium should be smooth with no sharp edges. Mesh ventilation panels need to be located at either end of the cage to provide adequate ventilation. Too little ventilation could result in the snake suffering from respiratory problems, whereas too much ventilation can make it difficult to maintain the required range of temperatures and humidity levels across the enclosure. The vivarium must be long enough to allow the snake to stretch out to its full length. There will therefore be sufficient space to allow the snake to regulate its body temperature by either moving to hotter areas to warm up or to use cooler areas, including entering hides or the water bath, to cool down.

A water bath that is large enough for the snake to bathe in and heavy enough to prevent the snake tipping it over should be provided in the cooler end of the vivarium. Snakes often defecate in water, so the bath must be easy to drain and keep clean. Strong, secure branches are also needed to allow the snake to climb and to provide access to resting areas higher up in the enclosure. The floor of the vivarium should be lined with coral sand, paper or AstroTurf. Care should be taken to only use substrates that cannot be swallowed by the snake, or is digestible, as any other type of substrate taken up when feeding can impact the gut. A large brick or rough rock should also be put in the enclosure so the snake can run itself along a rough surface to help remove its old skin. Royal pythons are nocturnal in the wild and are secretive snakes that spend much of the day hidden out of sight in refuges. Therefore, in captivity this snake will need access to refuges that are large enough for it to fit snugly inside. Suitable refuges include a hide box, hollowed out logs or a piece of bark located at a range of different temperature and humidity levels. One hide is needed in both the cool and warmer areas of the enclosure; it is also desirable to allow the snake to select a more humid refuge by including dampened sphagnum moss or substitute inside another hide. In addition to the presence of a water bath, the required moderately high humidity level of about 75 per cent can be maintained with the use of a diffuser or by a light misting of the enclosure every two to three days with warm water.

The temperature needs to range from 27–30°C across the vivarium during the day and should be reduced at night to 24–27°C. The fitting of a basking plate or reptile radiator into the roof can provide a safe heat source. A hotspot of 30–32°C should be provided using a non-light emitting heat lamp, which has a mesh guard to prevent the snake from having contact with it and getting burnt. The provision of a seasonal variation in the light cycle is desirable, but otherwise a 12-hour light/dark cycle is suitable for this species. A 'moonlight' tube is ideal to provide low light levels during the night.

Royal pythons should be offered single warm, defrosted mice or rats during the night period. If these are not eaten, defrosted hamsters, gerbils and guinea pigs of different shapes and sizes can be offered, but the prey should not be wider than the widest part of the snake. Pythons take a while to adjust to new surroundings and may refuse to eat for a few weeks. Once eating regularly, an adult royal python will eat two to four mice each week, or may prefer one rat. Pythons that have recently been fed should not be handled to reduce the risk of regurgitation. Clean water must also be provided in a large, heavy bowl. Remove soiled substrate as needed, but clean the rest of the enclosure every month or so to avoid too much disturbance.

THIS IS BASIC INFORMATION ONLY.

If you still believe that you could care for this animal then you must obtain further specialist information prior to taking on the responsibility.