

CORN SNAKES *Elaphe guattata*

Description: The name corn snake may have originated from the similarity of the belly markings to the checkered pattern on Indian corn. Corn snakes are also known as "red rat snakes". They are usually orange, yellow and black with large red splotches on the back with a white and black-checkered belly. Corn snakes will spend much of their time under cover and they are most active at dusk. In captivity they become very docile, and curious. As hatchlings they can be very fast and skittish. This is normal, in nature they must avoid being eaten. It is normal for a snake to hide for a few days after it has eaten. After digesting it's meal it will become more active. It is very rare to be bitten by a corn snake. A bite is little more than a scratch. It is also rare for a corn snake to defecate on you as you handle it as other snakes do. Although a corn snake can reach 6', the average size is around 4.5' or less.

Of all the reptiles, corn snakes are one of the easiest and hardy animals to keep as a pet. You won't need a pet sitter if you go away for a week or two, although fresh water is always good. In good health a snake can go a long time without eating. They are easier to care for than any other animal I can think of. They do not eat that often, defecate once a week, and cause no known allergies. They make no noise, and the only odor will be any waste left in the cage.

Home Range: Corn snakes are found throughout Florida and southeastern United States, as far north as Southern New Jersey and west to Tennessee.

Life Span: Up to 23 years.

Diet: Corn snakes are constrictors and will use their coils to suffocate food before eating. Whole mice are a complete balanced meal. No other food is necessary. Feed hatchlings 1 pink mouse every 4 to 7 days. Feeding every 7 days is sufficient, and you will be able to handle the snake two days after it has eaten. Never handle before two days has passed. This could cause digestive problems and stress. Feeding more often than every 7 days will speed up the growth rate, but handling will be limited. Fast growth is not always that healthy for animals. As the snake grows the meal size must be increased. By the time they are eating 4 pink mice at a time, move them up to fuzzy mice, then adult mice. As the snake matures they will need to eat less frequently. 1 or 2 adult mice is plenty for a full-grown corn snake per every 10 days. Excess fat can cause problems. A good rule to follow is, the diameter of the meal should not be more than 1 ½ times the diameter of the largest part of the snake's body. We always feed our snakes separately, in a brown paper bag with no substrate. Snakes are not that intelligent, but they get conditioned to events such as feeding. Feeding in their cage could cause a hungry snake to strike your hand by mistake when you are picking them up. Never handle the mice with your hands, use tongs. If you have rodent pets wash your hands before reaching in for your snake, or the scent may cause a strike.

Housing: A corn snake needs very little. A 20-gallon long aquarium with a secure clip on a wire top is sufficient for all but the exceptionally large specimens. When the snake reaches around 4' a longer cage would be preferable. At one end of aquarium you will need a heat mat on the bottom of the glass on the outside. A 10" x 10" heat mat taped to the bottom of the glass is perfect. The mat must be all the way to one end, and not cover more than one third of the cage. Follow the heat mat safety precautions, as all products are different. The temperature range on the cold end should be between 65° (night time low) to 85° daytime extreme. The warm end should be at 80° to 86° at all times. The two most important things regarding temperature are that the snake has at least 80° temperatures at one end to digest it's food, and it can cool down if it needs to. It will be necessary to monitor the temperature at the warm end, You can also control the heat with a rheostat or thermostat.

Substrates make it easier to clean the cage, make it more attractive, and provide the snake something to burrow in. Aspen shavings (least expensive and has a pleasant odor), or "Care Fresh bedding" (super absorbent but smells like wet cardboard when wet). Fresh water in a spill proof dish is necessary (large bowls with a lot of water won't dry up and will be less likely to tip over). A hide box is also necessary at the warm end. The snake will go under the water dish if the substrate is deep enough at the cool end. You may also use a humidity box to help the shedding process. For a hatchling this would consist of a plastic butter container filled with damp moss and a 1" hole cut in the cover. You can use a product called "Bed A Beast". It comes in a brick and needs to be soaked in water for it to expand to look like peat moss. With a cage set up as described, your snake will never have a shedding problem. Ambient room light is all the lighting necessary. Never place a cage in front of a window; sunlight can quickly overheat a snake. In most opinion having sunlight enter the room where an animal live is good for them.

Conclusion: Never forget that a corn snake is a wild animal. They are not cuddly pets that enjoy your affection, and if handled incorrectly may bite. Snakes cannot be trained to perform. Snakes are more of a display animal as tropical fish are, but don't mind being handled. Sometime they hide a lot, but are very interesting to watch. Always wash your hands after handling animals. Any reptile can carry salmonella. Toddlers should never handle reptiles; they will have their hands in their mouth before you can wash them. This Care Sheet was originally written by New England Herpetological Society. It can be found at www.neherp.com or www.AnimalCityInc.com

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