

Water Snakes

Natrix or Nerodia species

CAGING: Water snakes are fairly heavy-bodied, relatively inactive snakes, which reach a length of about three feet. They can be kept comfortably in a twenty gallon aquarium, which should have a wire mesh lid held on with clips. In spite of their name, these species are subject to skin infections if kept in a damp cage. As their droppings tend to be semi-liquid, they should be kept in a cage with an easily cleaned floor. Paper towels or black and white newspaper are recommended. Sand, gravel, wood chips and corn cob bedding should be avoided. Living plants should not be kept in the cage, as they increase the humidity level.

WATER: Fresh water must be available at all times. The water dish should be too small for the snake to bathe in, except during skin shedding. The water should be changed frequently, and the bowl should be untipplable.

TEMPERATURE: Water snakes are from cool temperate regions, and do well at ordinary household temperatures, but should be protected from cold, so some type of heating is needed. This can be provided by a heating pad or a red light bulb in a reflector fitting. (A red light bulb will allow the snake to sleep without having to turn off the heat at night.) The heating pad can be placed under the cage. The light should be placed above the cage so that it shines down into the cage. Place either one so that only one end of the cage is heated, giving your snake a temperature gradient. A thermometer should be kept in the warm end of the cage to assure that you maintain a good temperature.

FOOD: Water snakes will eat fish and amphibians, and some will eat newborn mice. Since recent research indicates that a steady diet of oily fish may be harmful to snakes, it would be better to feed these snakes on amphibians when these are available. In general, fish and amphibian eating snakes require more food than rodent eating snakes; food should be offered at least once per week, preferably twice. If you can switch your snake over to eating dead mice, it will be easier to feed and probably healthier. A water snake eating mice only needs to be fed once a week at most.

CLEANING: Cages must be kept clean and dry to prevent infections, scale rot, and other problems. Anti-bacterial cleaning solutions are recommended. One ounce of bleach in ten ounces of water is one such solution. Rinse the cage with clean water after using any solution. Don't use Lysol, Lestoil or other such oil-based cleaners; they are deadly to reptiles. As noted above, these snakes are especially prone to skin disease, therefore, the cage substrate (bedding) must be kept dry.

HANDLING: Water snakes often object to being handled when first acquired, and are capable of inflicting nasty bites. Most will adapt to captivity quite well, given time and good care, often becoming quite tame. Don't handle any snake for 48 hours after feeding, or if it becomes ill or stops feeding, unless the cage needs cleaning. Keep handling to a minimum when your snake is getting ready to shed. The skin can be damaged easily during this time.

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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