

# COMMON BOA CONSTRICTOR CARE SHEET

## (*Boa constrictor imperator*)

Common boas (also commonly referred to as Colombian or Colombian Red-tailed boas) are a midsized subspecies of the widespread boa constrictor. This particular subspecies can be found throughout Mexico, Central America, and into Northwestern South America (Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru). They can also be found on several islands off of this range. Boa constrictors can be found in a wide variety of habitats and have both terrestrial and arboreal (meaning tree dwelling) habits. However, as they become older and larger, they usually become more terrestrial. Boas (most species anyway), unlike pythons, do not lay eggs but rather give birth to "live young after the eggs develop internally. This is known as being ovoviviparous. Common boas (or BCIs, which is short for *Boa constrictor imperator*) are a popular choice in the herp hobby due to their usually placid dispositions, ease of care, and relatively manageable sizes as adults. Like the ball python, many morphs exist and are being created every year.

### Boa constrictor Taxonomy

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata S

uborder: Serpentes

Family: Boidae

Subfamily: Boinae

Genus: Boa

Species Epithet: *Boa constrictor*

**Overall Difficulty Level: Novice-Intermediate** If captive born and well established, Boa constrictors can make for suitable animals to keep for the novice-intermediate level reptile owner or enthusiast. Care for most Boas is not difficult, and is rather straightforward, but potential Boa keepers should be aware of and comfortable with keeping and handling a snake that has the potential to reach six to nine feet on average and be familiar with general snake husbandry in order to successfully keep boas. Given the proper care, boa constrictors can attain longevity of 20-30 years in captivity, sometimes up to 40 years.

### Size and Description

BCI neonates are usually around 12 to 18 inches in length. Adult boas range from about 72 to 108"(or ' six to nine feet in length depending on the sex of the animal). Males typically attain smaller sizes than females do, although exceptions do exist. As a species, Boa constrictors are highly variable in coloration among the different subspecies, races, and localities. However, the typical "Colombian red tailed boa" that is the most commonly kept and bred in captivity is a medium to large sized snake with black, brown, or reddish brown bow-tie shaped dorsal blotches on a tan, light brown, or grayish ground color. The posterior third of the body and the tail usually have a series of large reddish to reddish brown dorsal blotches outlined in a yellowish to cream color. The head is fairly distinct and

arrow shaped, and has a pale stripe running from the center of the head to the back of the neck. There is also typically a dark post ocular stripe behind each eye. Heat sensitive labial or facial pits are absent on all Boa constrictors.

### **Enclosure/Housing**

The enclosure you choose must be secure to prevent the escape of the inhabitant and provide adequate ventilation. Neonate to juvenile Boa constrictors can be maintained in a 15-20 gallon long glass terrarium with a secure screen top. Larger numbers of hatchling to sub adult boa constrictors can be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriately sized plastic shoe box sized containers with holes punched or melted in for ventilation. These containers are made by Iris, Rubbermaid, and Sterilite. Racks are usually heated with Flexwatt heat tape either installed along the back wall of the rack as back heat or on the rear half of the floor of each slot as belly heat, and should be monitored with a quality thermostat.

Caging for adult Boa constrictors can include almost any of the commercially available plastic, wooden, melamine, or PVC enclosures with front opening sliding or hinged acrylic or glass doors. These types of enclosures provide increased security for snakes within them and space can be better utilized with them since they are stackable. Temperature and humidity are also relatively easy to maintain in these cages, and most are available with built in lighting and heating elements. In general, the minimum caging dimensions that most adult males can be kept in would be 48" X 24". Since adult females are typically larger than males, a minimum caging size of 72" X 24" is required for most females. Adults can also be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriate sized sweater to blanket box sized containers (72 quarts) such as those provided by ARS or Freedom Breeder Caging. These racks are commonly used to house medium to large boas and pythons.

A hide-box for allowing the snake to retreat from view is recommended as part of a terrarium setup as well. Besides commercially available hide boxes, you could modify many things to serve as a hide box. They can include opaque plastic storage container, plastic litter pans for cats, and inverted flowerpots for example. A water dish should also be provided within the enclosure and be changed at least once weekly or sooner if fouled. The dish should be heavy enough so that it isn't easily tipped over (plastic or ceramic crock dishes work well). It should also be cleaned and disinfected periodically.

### **Temperature and Heating**

As with all reptiles, Boa constrictors are ectothermic animals, meaning it is important to provide them with an external heat source and thermal gradient for proper digestion and gestation. There should be a warm side and a cooler side to the enclosure. To create the warm side, you can use an under tank heater (UTH), Flexwatt heat tape, or a radiant heat panel on one half of the enclosure. Many commercially available plastic and PVC enclosures and racks come with their own heating elements. The warm side should remain around 87-90 degrees Fahrenheit. It is also important to disallow any snake to come into direct contact with any heating element, as thermal burns can result, and can sometimes be severe, requiring professional veterinary attention. UV or other overhead lighting is not required for most species of snakes, including boa constrictors. However, overhead UV lighting or fluorescent lighting can improve the cage's aesthetics as well as visibility within.

### **Substrate**

The substrate is the enclosure's bedding. Newspaper, commercially available cage liner material, cypress mulch, or coconut husk fibers are all acceptable substrates for boa constrictors. Avoid pine and cedar shavings, as these substrates are toxic to snakes. The substrate should be kept dry and be spot cleaned when needed to reduce the likelihood of bacterial outbreaks. A complete substrate

change and replacement should be done periodically as well, with that interval depending on the substrate being used.

### **Feeding and Diet**

As with all species of boas and pythons, the common boa is a non venomous constrictor. Boas are opportunistic feeders, and will feed on a variety of prey items in their natural ranges including a variety of rodents and other small to medium sized mammals, birds, and lizards.

Neonate boa constrictors can be started off once every five to seven days on rat pinkies. The size of the prey item should be increased accordingly as the snake grows. Adult boas can be fed less often than neonates. A general rule of thumb to follow is to offer prey items that are no larger than the widest point of the snake. Adults can be offered medium to large sized adult rats every 7 to 14 days (or once every week or two). It is important to not to overfeed your boas however, since obesity and compromised health of the snake can result over time. In general, most captive bred and born, or otherwise well acclimated boas are normally strong and reliable feeders that seldom present any significant issues with regards to feeding.

### **Temperament and Handling**

Boas, like many species of snake, are often initially more defensive as hatchlings or juveniles. A defensive or startled boa may coil into an "S" shaped defensive posture, gape, and hiss to warn a perceived threat. They may also strike as well. With patience and gentle handling, boas will become more docile and can be worked with more easily (especially as they age). It should be kept in mind however that even a supposedly docile snake may bite or react defensively if suddenly startled or frightened or when food is detected (resulting in a feeding response bite).

When handling any snakes, try to avoid grabbing or restraining the snake too tightly, as this may cause injury to the animal and/or force it to react defensively (as mentioned previously). Handle snakes of any age or size gently and avoid sudden rapid movements, particularly in front of or above the snake. Do not handle a snake for one to two days after feeding, or else the animal may regurgitate its meal. It is also important to practice basic hygienic and sanitary measures when keeping reptiles (or any animal) as a precaution against contracting zoonotic diseases such as salmonellosis.

Boa constrictors can become relatively large and powerful snakes as adults depending on the subspecies and/or locality. Therefore it is important to handle large snakes safely and correctly by not placing a snake around your neck or upper torso, or allowing unsupervised contact with young children or others who may not be experienced in handling a large snake. Every incident involving a snake, or other reptile, undoubtedly fuels further legislation against keeping reptiles and negative publicity towards the reptile hobby as a whole.