

South African Rock Python

Basic Information and Care Requirements

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Introduction:

This sheet deals with the South African Rock Python. Central African Rock Pythons will be handled separately. The central species lacks or has a greatly reduced dark spot in front of the eyes which is present in the southern species. These pythons are among the true giant snakes, considered the third largest species. Before getting one of these as a pet, ask yourself if you can house an animal which can grow to over 6 feet in length within the first year of its life and eventually reach as much as 15 feet with a weight potential of several hundred pounds. You will need to provide a **very** large enclosure for such an animal. They can live over 25 years or more. As a general rule, Rock Pythons tend to be aggressive; but this will vary. They are capable of biting and severely injuring you. Choose a pet responsibly, consider whether you can handle it safely, could it endanger anyone else in your home, and can you house it appropriately.

Basic Information:

Scientific Name – *Python natalensis*

Natural Habitat – varied terrains in forests and grasslands throughout Southern Africa (approximate range in Red)

Size – average around 8-12 feet, with males generally being smaller than females. They can weigh over 100 lbs.

Lifespan – expect 15-25 years for a healthy snake in captivity

Diet – carnivorous, feed weekly as babies or juveniles, every other week as they progress towards rabbit sized meals and then bi-weekly to monthly as adults. This schedule applies when feeding appropriately sized mice, rats, and small rabbits. Feed small rabbits when the snake has reached the 8 foot length range. Moving to larger rabbits as the snake grows. Do not try to feed your snake “the biggest thing it will eat!” This can lead to regurgitation and other issues. The prey shouldn’t be larger than the widest part of the snake. Always provide constant access to fresh, clean water.

Housing – While young Rock Pythons can be housed in small enclosures, you must be prepared to provide a much larger enclosure for an adult. The rule here is “the bigger, the better.” Ideally, you should provide an enclosure at least 6’L X 3’W X 4’H. The idea is to provide your animal with enough room to stretch out, and for a temperature range within its environment. **Adult Rock Pythons should not be kept in fish tanks!!**

You will need to provide a water dish large enough for the entire snake to soak in, some form of hiding space such as cork bark or a hide box, and some climbing branches will be readily utilized by these snakes. You can use paper, outdoor carpeting, cypress or aspen mulch, even potting soil that does not contain perlite as a substrate. Irregardless of what substrate you use, it is vital that you keep it clean.



Lighting and Heating:

Your Rock Python will need a source of daytime lighting which can be provided by using a reptile daytime spot light. This will also provide a source of heat and a basking spot. You may also wish to provide a nighttime bulb or ceramic heater to maintain the temperature at night without the bright light which would disturb the snake at night. **Do not use a white light at night!** You should provide an overall enclosure temperature of 78-82°F with a basking spot around 95°F. Night time temperatures can drop to 75-80°F. Snakes do not require UV lighting like most other reptiles. If using light bulbs for heat, be sure that they are placed in such a way that the snake cannot contact any hot surfaces. You can also provide heat through under tank heaters, specialty reptile heating platforms and pig blankets. Be sure to use a thermoregulator to allow for better control over the temperature. The heated area does need to be large enough for the entire snake to bask. A small spot of heat will not be enough for a large snake.

Humidity: The Rock Python requires a high relative humidity around 50-60%. Maintaining this level of humidity will help to avoid illnesses and also aid the snake in shedding properly. This can be done by providing a hide box with a layer of moist (not soggy!) mulch or long fiber sphagnum moss in it.

Choosing a snake and acclimatizing it to your home:

When choosing a pet, look for an individual that is active and responsive to handling, and which feels strong and muscular. Animals which show loose folds of skin along the body (dehydration); lumps along the body; signs of external parasites such as ticks or mites (look closely around the mouth, eyes, and cloaca); signs of runny or bloody feces in the tank (internal parasites), any discharge of mucus from the mouth, nose, or eyes may be unhealthy. If possible, find out if the animal is eating well, and what it has been fed.

It is not unusual for a snake to refuse to feed immediately when you change its environment. Provide a good set up, and give it some time to adjust to its new home. Try not to handle it or overly disturb it for about two weeks, then how it responds to contact and an offering of food. A visit to a veterinarian is recommended for a fecal exam to detect internal parasites.

Sources:

de Vosjoli, Phillippe, and Roger Klingenburg, DVM, Burmese Pythons plus Reticulated Pythons and Related Species. Irvine, CA: Advanced Vivarium Systems, 2005. www.avbooks.com

de Vosjoli, Phillippe, The Art of Keeping Snakes. Irvine, CA: Advanced Vivarium Systems, 2004. www.avbooks.com

For a more detailed information, please read our advanced care sheets at www.grare.org/library/care.html