

CAPTIVE CARE OF THE DUMERIL'S BOA

(Boa dumerili)

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This care sheet is intended to get you started with your new snake. There is much more information regarding this species of reptile. To see recommended websites for more information, please visit one of the links on the last page of this care sheet.



Selecting Your Dumeril's Boa

Choose an animal that has clear firm skin, rounded body shape, clean vent, clear eyes, and who actively flicks its tongue around when handled. All ground boas are naturally shy about having their heads touched or handled by strangers. When held, the snake should grip you gently but firmly when moving around. All young snakes are food for other, larger snakes, birds, lizards and mammalian predators so your hatchling may be a bit nervous at first but should settle down quickly.

Selecting an escape-proof enclosure

Select an enclosure especially designed for housing snakes, such as the glass tanks with the locking screen lids. All snakes are escape artists; boas are especially powerful and cunning when it comes to breaking out. A good starter tank for a hatchling is a 20-gallon tank. Offspring are very nervous and need smaller spaces for the first six months. As the snake grows you will need to house it in something suitable for its size. The habitat width and length should not equal less than the length of the snake. For example, if you have a 3ft snake, then the width can be 12" and the length can be 24". It is ok to house an adult snake in an enclosure larger than its length. The average maximum length for an adult female Dumeril's Boa is 8 feet.

Select a suitable substrate

These types of snakes require a thick bed of substrate for the first few years. This is the only animal that I recommend corncob bedding. It can be purchased pre-shredded in quantities of 5lbs or so. It must be thick enough for the snake to burrow comfortably and completely. Scoop out feces as soon as you can to keep the bedding fresh and free of bacteria. When feeding in this substrate, be sure that the rodent food is dry and free of any moisture. This will prevent the corncob from sticking to the food as the snake constricts and swallows it.

Once the animal is established, you can use more decorative ground cover such as commercially prepared corncob bedding, cypress mulch, pine, or aspen shavings. However, keep in mind that using loose substrates will result in the need to feed in a separate container to reduce the risk of ingesting such substrates. Other substrates, such as cedar and potting soil, have chemicals that are harmful to most reptiles and are strongly advised against.

Remember: the easier it is to clean, the faster you'll do it!

Provide a hiding place

If using a burrowing substrate, such as corncob pellets, then you will not need to provide a hide. However, it is recommended to provide fake plants in cluster to provide an extra sense of security. A half-log is available at pet stores. An empty cardboard box or upside-down opaque plastic container (unused kitty litter pan), both with an access doorway cut into one end, can also be used. The plastic is easily cleaned when necessary; the box can be tossed out when soiled and replaced with a new one. Place a nice climbing branch or two in the tank with some fake greenery. Your snake may also use this to shed against.

Keeping it warm

Proper temperature range is essential to keeping your snake healthy. The ambient air temperature throughout the enclosure must be maintained between 78-82F during the day, with a basking area kept at 84-87F. At night, the ambient air temperature on the coolest side may be allowed to drop down no lower than 70-75F only if a basking area of at least 80F remains available. Special reptile heating pads that are manufactured to maintain a temperature about 20 degrees higher than the air temperature may be used underneath the enclosure. Heating pads made for people, available at all drug stores, are also available; these have built-in hi-med-lo switches and can be used under a glass enclosure. Periodically test the temperatures in the enclosure several times a week in several areas of the enclosure. Use thermometers; don't try to guess the temperature - you will either end up with a snake that will be too cold to eat and digest its food or one ill or dead from overheating.

Lighting

No special lighting is needed. To make it easier to see your snake during the day, you can use a full-spectrum light or low wattage incandescent bulb in the enclosure during the day. Make sure the snake cannot get into direct contact with the light bulbs, as snakes are very prone to getting seriously burned. Respect your snake's needs and be sure to provide a hide box if they can't burrow, and expect them to use it!

Feeding

FOOD: Allow your snake to acclimate to its new home for a few days. Start your hatchling (about 11" in length) off with a single pre-killed one week to 10-day old "fuzzy" mouse. A smaller sized hatchling may require a smaller mouse; try a pre-killed 5-day old. Older boas may be fed larger pre-killed mice or rats. The rule of thumb is that you can feed prey items that are no wider than the widest part of the snake's body. If your boa does not eat right away, give him at least another week before you offer again. Often, Dumeril's boas may be finicky eaters. Try a pre-killed dark colored mouse instead of the common white mice.

FEEDING ENVIRONMENT: Once the feeding habits of your Dumeril's boa is established, it is good to get in the habit of removing your boa from his enclosure and putting him in a clear tub with an opaque lid. This helps you and your boa to develop a feeding "relationship". Snakes are very habitual and if you get them in the habit of eating in a tub, then they are less likely to respond with strikes every time you open their cage. The tub only needs to be half the length of the snake. For problem feeders, you can leave the food in the tub and cover the tub with a dark towel or sheet. Leave them alone with the food for a maximum of 2 hours. If they have not eaten, then you can wait another week and try again or move on to other options, such as B12 shots (for appetite stimulant) or force-feeding.

FORCE-FEEDING: You must not wait too long if your snake is not eating. Your snake could die from force-feeding if it is not strong enough to digest. Six weeks is the maximum your hatchling boa should go without feeding. If you have not had any experience force feeding a snake, you may not want to try it yourself until you have seen someone do it. Force-feeding, whether of a mouse or with a formula inserted by catheter and syringe, is very stressful for the snake (and it isn't much fun for the owner!). If your boa has gone several months without eating and is beginning to noticeably lose weight, take it to a reptile vet. If you feel you must force feed your snake, use the tail of a mouse or small rat. It is easy to feed and it will give your snake something to digest until you can seek more help.

Water

Provide a bowl of fresh water at all times. Your snake will both drink and soak, and may defecate, in it. Check it daily and change when soiled. Soaking is especially good just before a shed. When they eyes clear from their milky opaque, or "blue" state, soak the snake in a tub of warm water for ten minutes or so, then lightly dry it off, and return it immediately to its tank; it should shed cleanly within twenty-four hours. For problem sheds, use a dash of mineral oil in the warm water. For eye cap problems, use non-diluted mineral oil on a cotton swab and gently dap the eyes with the swab and immediately place the snake back in its tank--do not wipe off mineral oil.

Conclusion

Knowing what to expect during the life of your boa is an essential part of good health for your snake. Having knowledge of adult size, potential health problems related directly to this species, and the average behavioral patterns of this species can help you to maintain a good relationship with your snake. Do as much research as you can and find a vet that will treat your snake prior to any problems.

Recommended Sources for the Care of Dumeril's Boas:

- Melissa Kaplan's www.anapsid.org
- Information source, www.redtailboas.net
- Association of Reptile and Amphibian Veterinarians, www.arav.org