

Corn Snake (*Elaphe guttata*) Care Plan

(NB – the requirements for rat snakes, *Elaphe obsoleta*, are very similar to those for corn snakes).

Corn snakes are small to medium sized snakes from North America. They can live for up to 20 years and grow up to 1 ½ metres in length.

It is important to keep records of feeding and shedding dates, passing of urates and faeces, weights and any veterinary care.

Suitability as Pets

Generally an easy to maintain non-aggressive snake suitable for a novice keeper. A relatively simple entry level Squamate suitable for most informed reptile keepers.

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Sexing & Reproduction

Corn snakes become sexually mature at around 70cm in length and 100g in weight.

Start breeding them when at least 2 years old and 80cm long. Start cooling the vivarium in November or December and maintain them at 10-15°C in a darkened room for 3 months. It is a good idea to hibernate your snake for this period even if you do not intend to breed from it.

Do not feed for 3 weeks prior to, or during cooling but continue to provide fresh water.

At the beginning of March gradually turn the heat back up and start feeding again. If you are intending to breed from a female, she should be fed every 3-5 days to build up her reserves for egg laying. Once the female has shed, place her in the male's vivarium for mating.

A few weeks after successful mating, the female should slough. A week or two after this, she should lay up to around 20 eggs. Provide a nesting site such as a plastic box containing damp moss. Incubate the eggs in a container with a 50:50 water : vermiculite mixture at around 28°C.

Juvenile care

For the first 8 months or so, juveniles can be kept in small plastic containers with ventilation holes covered by mesh in the lids. Place a third of the container only on a heat mat or strip. Kitchen paper can be used as a cheap substrate. Provide a hide box eg a cardboard tube and a shallow water dish.

Housing

Corn snakes require a warm, secure vivarium with the correct temperature gradient and places to hide. It is essential that vivarium temperature and humidity are monitored to ensure that the snake

is living in the correct environment for the species. Ideally thermometers should be placed at each end of the vivarium.

A vivarium 100cm long x 40cm high x 40cm wide is suitable for an adult corn snake.

Faecal material should be removed as soon as possible and the entire vivarium cleaned and disinfected every 2-3 months.

Lighting

No special lighting is required and a 12 hour day/night photoperiod is suitable.

Heating/ Temperature

The vivarium temperature should be 25-30°C (75-85°F) during the day, with a night-time drop of a few degrees. There should be a temperature gradient from one end of the enclosure to the other, enabling the snake to regulate its own temperature by moving around. This is easily achieved by placing a heat mat or tape under or against the side of the vivarium at one end. Alternatively ceramic bulbs, spot lights or power plates can be used, although it is essential that heaters inside the vivarium are guarded to prevent direct contact by the snake. Use a thermostat to control the heat system if possible. Hot rocks are not recommended.

Furniture (Climbing and shelter)

Provide a hide box or log, and a shallow water dish large enough for total immersion at the cooler end. Newspaper, Astroturf, outdoor carpeting, dust free pine shavings or peat are all suitable substrates. An object with an abrasive surface such as a piece of bark should be provided to facilitate shedding of the skin.

Water /Humidity

Humidity can range from 30-70%. In general reptiles require higher humidity when shedding.

Diet / Feeding

In the wild corn snakes eat mainly rodents but also birds, lizards and frogs. In captivity they can be easily maintained on a diet of defrosted mice and weaner rats. In general they should be fed every 5-7 days, with younger snakes being fed more frequently than older ones. Start feeding hatchlings with pinkies after their first shed and feed every 2-5 days. Most corn snakes are good feeders.

If snakes are kept in pairs or groups, they should be separated for feeding. Reluctant feeders can be encouraged by wiggling the mouse with a pair of forceps, warming it or by washing the mouse and scenting it by rubbing against a chick, a shed lizard skin, or by placing it in a small cardboard box recently vacated by a live rodent.

Your snake may not eat if the environmental conditions are unsuitable, if it is about to shed, or if it is stressed (for example by excessive handling or lack of a hiding place). Females may not eat when gravid. Fresh water should be provided at least every 2 days.

Food Dusting/ Vitamin Supplementation

Generally not required

Preventative Care & Disease Management

Quarantine all new snakes for at least 3 months. During this time record normal patterns of eating, defaecating, weight gain and behaviour and have them examined by a vet.

It is a good idea to take along a fresh faecal sample so that the vet can check for the presence of gastrointestinal parasites such as worms or protozoa.

If your snake shows any signs of illness such as regurgitation, abnormal body position, decreased appetite or abnormal respiration it should be examined by a vet as soon as possible.

Accidents and injuries can happen, both to the reptile and the reptile handler. Not only can bites happen, but also there are diseases that can be transmitted between animals - and that means between reptiles and humans.

Keepers should be ware of the prevention of reptile associated salmonellosis (RAS).

Good hygiene is essential, not only to your pet's health, but to your own.

Reptiles can be non- symptomatic carriers of Salmonella, bacteria that cause sometimes lethal food poisoning.

Children, the aged, and those who are immune-compromised are particularly susceptible to Salmonella from any source.

There are measures you can take to minimize risk:

- After handling your pet reptile, wash your hands with soap for at least 30 seconds, or use hand disinfectant.
- Disinfect any area you used to clean cages, dishes and do not use this area for food preparation.
- Use separate cleaning utensils, not the sponge you use to wash your own dishes.
- Reptiles are NOT recommended if you're pregnant or have a young child or an immunocompromised person in your home.
- Don't kiss a reptile pet.