

the Ball Python— the Most Keepable Python

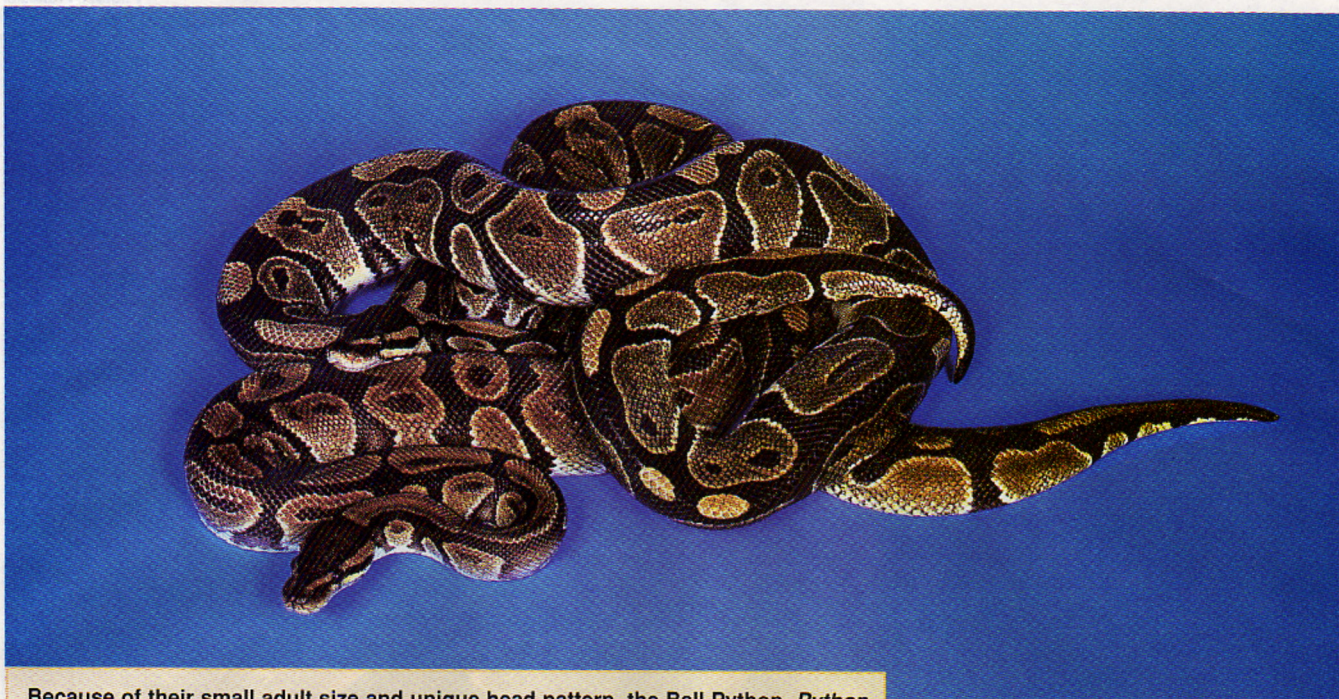
The content of our hobby may be slightly different from most, but it follows the same sort of route as any other hobby. Initially you pitch yourself at an introductory level, learning the ropes, gaining experience, and doing all the reading you can. As you become more competent,

you gradually try harder things or "trade up" as it were.

The same applies to keeping reptiles. Nine times out of ten you start with a gecko or skink and end up with a monitor; or a garter snake and end up with a python. But in this latter case, it's usually what python you

**PAUL
DONOVAN**

Ball Pythons make the best pets of all the pythons for the "average" hobbyist without an extra room to turn into a python pen. They do have their problems, however, that every hobbyist must be aware of before buying an animal.



Because of their small adult size and unique head pattern, the Ball Python, *Python regius* (top, I. Francais photo), is likely to be confused only with another African python, *P. anchietae* (bottom, K. H. Switak photo). *P. anchietae* is rare and virtually unavailable, its body is more spotted than banded, and the brown on top of the head continues into the body pattern.



end up with that can make all the difference.

Without a doubt, the Burmese Python (*Python molurus bivittatus*) is the most popular of all the large snakes currently maintained in captivity today. However, one limiting factor going against it is that it grows quite large, up to 25 or more feet, and this puts it at a bit of a disadvantage to many. For this reason,

many people go to the opposite end of the ruler, as it were, and look at the Ball or Royal Python, *Python regius*. In some respects they are, and aren't, one of the best choices. Yes, they are small, but they are renowned as being stubborn feeders, and this can be a frustrating problem, particularly for the relative novice. It immediately puts on your lap a unique set of problems that you

may not yet be ready to take on.

Having said this, it is sometimes possible to pick an individual that feeds readily from day one. This is especially true with captive-bred young Ball Pythons, and you should always be sure to ask your dealer about the origin of your specimen. Also, before you hand over any money for a Ball Python, find out when the specimen last fed, and whether it fed by itself or was force-fed—an honest dealer will answer truthfully.

COUCH POTATO

The Ball Python has to be one of the most inactive of all the snakes and is quite easily aligned to the human equivalent of the "couch potato." It spends its time either loosely coiled on a flat rock or tucked tightly in a ball. It is probably stating the obvious, but one of the reasons for its common name is this habit of coiling itself into a ball when threatened. So tight is the ball that it becomes impossible to unravel the snake. Should your snake require force feeding, be sure to grab the

head first, otherwise it will coil up like a spring in your hands and you may have to wait a considerable time before the snake uncoils.

Fortunately, frequent feeding usually will see this habit diminish. Because of their small size, they are at least handleable pythons. Their good-natured disposition also makes them suitable for the younger members of the hobby. There always is a risk of accidents when large snakes and young children mix together, but fortunately such incidents are rare and you can be sure in your mind that the worst that can happen to your child is a bite. If anything, the snake is more at risk than the child—you know what kids are like: they bite, drop, and stand on things!

NATURAL HISTORY

The Ball Python is a native of West Africa and reaches about 5 feet in length (though such giants are rare). This is the smallest of the African pythons, although the Angolan



Top: Though it is a gentle python, don't be misled—Ball Pythons have a full set of dental equipment and, if pressed, are not afraid to use it. Their small size, though, makes their bite less dangerous than that of larger pythons. They also don't seem to carry as many bacteria and amoebae on the gums as do other pythons, thus leading to fewer infections. Bottom: Ball Pythons are nicely patterned snakes that are easy to manipulate and will fit into many standard photographic setups, so nice photos are common.





Because so many Ball Pythons (especially young and wild-caught adults) refuse to feed for weeks or months, be prepared for a few trips to the vet. In addition to routine checkups, your vet may suggest injections of vitamin B12 and antibiotics to make the snake a better feeder.

primitive form of foreplay if you like. The spurs are larger and more conspicuous in males than females, making sexing relatively easy.

GENERAL MAINTENANCE

Apart from difficulties with feeding, the care of this species of python in captivity follows that of most other snakes. The terrarium needs to be large, but not huge. Don't forget that these are not the most active of snakes, so there would be little point in providing a dwelling larger than perhaps 3 feet long and high by 2 feet wide. A terrarium of this size could house a pair or perhaps a trio. As for furnishings, a shallow layer of gravel on the floor with a water dish and a rock or two are all that you need. The water dish should be large enough for the snake to fully submerge itself if desired. Typical Ball Pythons may spend a day or two each week in their water bowl, but be sure they have plenty of dry areas in which to spend the rest of their time.

Because this is a climbing species (at least when younger and lighter in weight), one or two stout branches must be provided, and it often is a good idea to build a small shelf or ledge in one corner of the cage where one of the branches rests. Obviously the weight and size of the snake will mean that living plants cannot flourish and thus can be omitted entirely or plastic plants can be added in their stead.

A temperature range of 77 to 86°F is preferred, along with a basking

Python (*Python anchietae*) is of similar proportions, short and stocky. Found in the forests and woodlands as well as the edges of cultivated fields, the python spends its time lying up in nooks and crannies for most of the dry season. It is an attractively marked snake with a ground color of brown to iridescent bluish brown with large irregularly spaced light brown or golden blotches on the back and flanks. The blotches usually are ovular in shape and may or may not have a dark inner "eye spot."

The head is typically python-shaped, but it is quite small in relation to the chunky body and there is a distinct neck. Heat-sensitive pits are present on the upper lip.

In common with other pythons and boas, a pelvic girdle is present that supports a pair of spurs, the remnants of hind legs. The spurs can be seen on either side of the cloaca (vent) as small but noticeable thorn-like projections. They serve very little use today, although during courtship the male may "tickle" the female with them—a

area in the upper part of this range or slightly higher. A drop of a few degrees may be beneficial at night. This is not a species that needs a hibernation period, though a drop of a few degrees during the winter months actually may do them some good.

BREEDING

Although Ball Pythons are bred in captivity in fair numbers, it is quite an achievement for a novice keeper to succeed. Most breeding is done by experienced breeders operating with large numbers of specimens. The general outline of breeding is much as for any other python. Males have more pronounced spurs than females and also longer tails. The difference in tail length may be quite obvious, and it seldom is necessary to resort to probing for hemipene pouches.

The clutch of eggs of this python is small, numbering between eight and ten, though as few as four can be laid. In common with other pythons, the female coils around them for an incubation period of some 13 weeks. Although the eggs can be removed and incubated artificially, they have just as much chance of going full term if left with the female. If you are successful, you should end up with some highly attractive hatchlings. Several color mutations have appeared in captive-bred Ball Pythons of late, some selling at high prices, and as more breeding takes place the chance of more nice patterns developing increases.

A PROBLEM FEEDER

The staple diet of this python consists chiefly of small rodents (rats, mice, gerbils), although small birds

also will be taken. From my experience, some individuals when kept in captivity do seem to have food preferences. Although most of the individuals I have kept readily accepted mice, I had one that steadfastly refused anything other than day-old chicks. Such preferences may be a major problem of which you must be aware. If the individual you have refuses rodents, try it on birds. Try different sizes and even different colors of prey. Some Ball Pythons dis-

tinguish between hamsters and white mice, for instance, and some may prefer dead food over living prey. Don't be afraid to experiment.

It is possible to paint a very bleak picture of feeding problems in this snake, especially young specimens imported from the wild in Africa or even from the "farms" in which the eggs are incubated and hatched under somewhat natural conditions. (See *RH*, Feb., 1998, for a discussion of Ball Pythons in Ghana, for

Photo: I. Francais.



Ball Pythons are not quite as stout as other common pythons, and they have distinctive markings. The head pattern, consisting of a large dark brown triangle bordered by wide golden stripes broken over the eyes, is remarkably constant.

instance). However, some individuals do adjust to captivity better than others—such Ball Pythons may be willing to feed almost from day one, and they may not even bother to coil when picked up. It seems to be a matter of you pay your money and take your chances.

This species is noted for putting itself on self-imposed fasts that may extend from several weeks to several months. There even is mention of an individual that fasted for 22 months! How accurate this is I don't know, but the longest non-feeder I had went for seven months. Providing the individual is well-fed prior to fasting, there seldom is any cause for concern. It is when thin specimens fast that we should begin to

Small size and placid temperament allow Ball Pythons to be kept in small containers that are easy to rack and change. Ball Pythons seldom move, feed infrequently, and defecate at long intervals.

worry, for they lack the body stores to sustain them through the period.

How long do you allow the snake to fast before “doing something about it”? Personally, I think a 22-month fast is taking things a bit to the extreme. The snake inevitably would be too thin after this length of time and, unless it began feeding again on its own, the physical stress of force feeding it could actually lead to shock and death.

Force feeding is common in this species. I've known individuals that, from the week they hatched to the day they died, had to be force-fed. There is a great degree of risk of damaging the snake internally while force feeding, and for this reason alone I would discourage a novice from even thinking of buying a specimen unless a guarantee was given that the snake was accepting food on its own accord.

During fasting the snake may be prepared to start feeding again at any



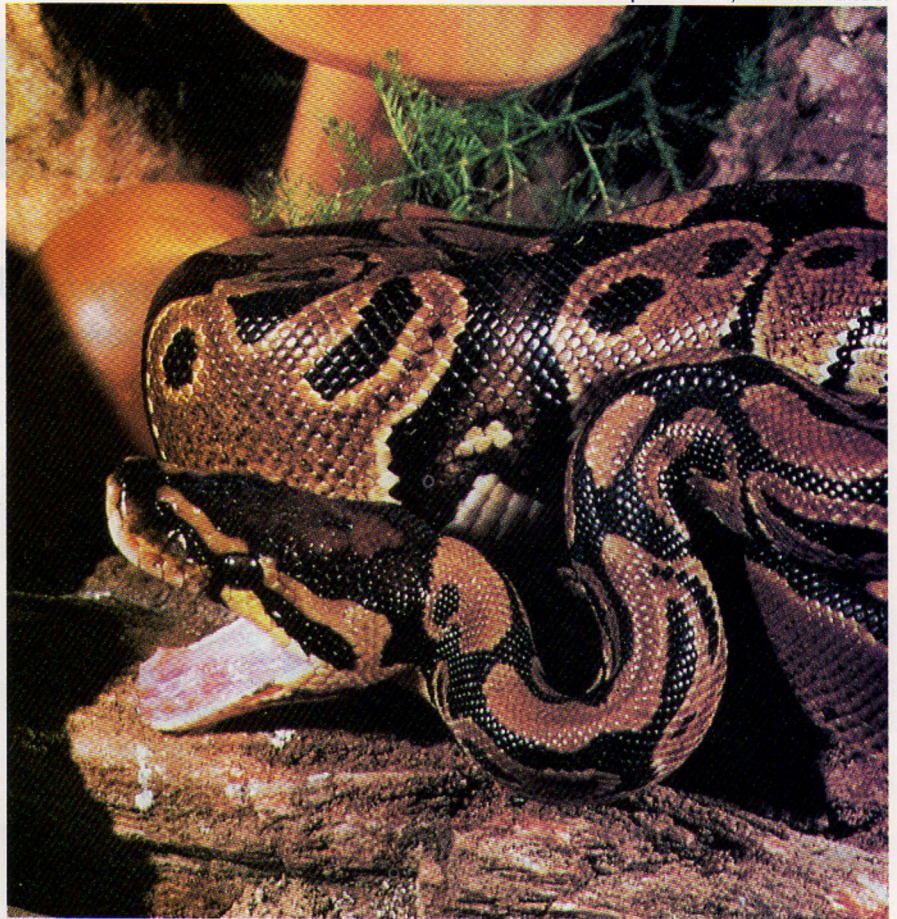
Though small, Ball Pythons still reach 4 and occasionally even 6 feet in length, and they make interesting zoo displays. Their minimal needs are easily met even in small zoos.

time. Fasts may extend for months, but they also may last just weeks. It is important to offer a fasting snake food at regular intervals, perhaps every two weeks, to avoid inadvertently starving it to death because you were under the illusion that it was on a self-imposed starvation diet. Such misunderstandings have happened before.

Photo: I. Francals.



The real solution to the feeding problem in Ball Pythons is to purchase only captive-bred snakes. Additionally, the snake should be bred locally, not imported from a farm. Such captive-breds often are twice as expensive to purchase as "bargain" imports that may sell for under \$30, but they almost always feed and live long lives. "Bargain" snakes may die a few months after purchase, may never feed on their own, and may cost you considerable vet bills. Not all "bargain" snakes are bad, but the majority of them do require more work than most beginners can afford to lavish on them. Similarly, not all captive-breds are wonderful, but poor snakes here are the exception. Even when buying captive-breds, however, be sure to try to get a promise from the dealer that the snake is feeding on its own and also make a note of its food preference.



Ball Pythons have deep heat-sensing pits in the upper lip scales that they use to help detect the small mammals that are their major prey. They can strike just as fast as any other python and may be just as tenacious considering their size. Though gentle animals, you should never forget that they still are pythons.





Photo by I. Francois

Ball Python, Royal Python

(*Python regius* Shaw, 1802)

- **Family:** Pythonidae, the pythons
- **Care Difficulty:** Wild-caught ones can be difficult, but captive-bred specimens are easily cared for snakes.
- **Size:** Most individuals get no longer than four or five feet, but a size of up to six feet is possible.
- **Description:** Ball Pythons are stocky snakes. Their bodies are very thick for their length. They have rather short tails, and the head is well set-off from the neck, rounded at the snout. They have a dark eye with a black stripe running through it. Behind the snout, the scales of the head are broken and fragmented into many small scales. Large pits line the lip scales; these are heat-sensing organs used to locate prey.

These are attractive, although not brightly colored snakes. The base color ranges from a honey-golden color to a dark brown. Along the body are irregular saddles of dark brown to black. Each saddle is shaped vaguely like a barbell with a swelling in the middle. The saddles sometimes join together to various degrees, elongating into bands along the sides. Some individuals have the saddles joined down the back into an irregular stripe. The saddles may be outlined to some degree with white. The top of the head normally is solid dark brown to black. Lips and chin are white, usually, and the belly is grayish.

- **Range:** Ball Pythons range across much of western Africa, from Senegal south to Nigeria, then crossing central Africa in a narrow strip to northern Uganda. Many imports come out of Ghana.

- **Diet and Feeding:** These snakes eat rodents and other small mammals throughout their entire lives. They may occasionally take lizards or birds, but mammals are the staple diet. Because they are rather sedentary, one appropriately sized meal every seven to ten days will be an adequate feeding regimen. Watch your snake's girth, as Ball Pythons are prone to obesity.

In captivity, wild-caught Ball Python may refuse all other prey besides gerbils; captive-bred ones, of course, will eat the less expensive mice and rats. If your Ball Python refuses mice at first, before feeding it a gerbil, try switching the color of mouse offered. This works surprisingly often. There are other tricks you can use to convince an inappetent Ball Python to eat. One is to take a few young mice—pinkies or fuzzies—and place them in some type of container, leaving a hole in the top big enough for the python to enter. This setup mimics their natural behavior of hunting in underground mammalian nests.

Another option is to place a baby mouse or two (either prekilled or young enough so as not to be able to gnaw on the python) and the snake in a pillow case, knot it tightly, and leave it in a dark place for several hours. If neither of these methods work, try them again with different colors of mice and/or with prekilled mice that have had their skulls opened and the brains smeared around their bodies. (This grisly technique is called braining, and it often induces stubborn snakes to eat.)

These pythons are known to go on long hunger strikes. As long as the snake is not losing weight quickly, behaves normally (realizing the snake may be somewhat less active), and doesn't go more than five months without eating, do not be alarmed. Offer food twice a month during the strike, and the snake should come around after the fasting season. If it begins to lose substantial weight, take it to a reptile veterinarian to remedy the problem.

- **Habits:** Like many of the pythons, these are rather sedentary snakes. They hole up in burrows during the day—sometimes many in the same burrow—and emerge at night to hunt. Although primarily nocturnal, Ball Pythons do bask, seeming to prefer rather warm temperatures. These are creatures of the savannas and, if not hunted or collected in large numbers, can adapt to the presence of man. Ball Pythons tend to avoid thick forest, preferring the more open grasslands. However, they do climb and have been observed catching birds and mammals in trees. Most often, they hunt on the ground, going down into rodent burrows.

- **Temperature/Humidity:** Keep Ball Pythons with a gradient that runs from the upper 70s/low 80s to a high of 95 or 100°F. The humidity should be moderate. Although these snakes do not like high air humidity, it is good husbandry to keep the cage humidity moderate with a moist hiding area available.

- **Housing:** Because Ball Pythons do not get very large, housing them presents no special challenges. An adult will be comfortable in a cage measuring three feet by two feet by two feet. You will need a considerably larger cage if keeping several in one enclosure. If you do so, be sure they are accurately sexed; males may fight during the breeding season. Any of the commonly used snake substrates will work well for Ball Pythons: aspen bedding, reptile bark, sand, newspaper, recycled paper bedding. If using sand, feed the python in such a manner that it will not ingest the sand, which can cause gut impactions. Ball Pythons should be given plenty of hiding areas. Keep one on the warm end of the cage and one on the cooler end, adding one at each end per animal living in the cage. Although Ball Pythons often den together, each snake should be given its own hide box, so it may find privacy if it feels the need. Sturdy climbing branches will be used if provided, but they are not necessary. Having some climbing material under the heat lamp will allow your python to engage in natural basking behaviors.

A sturdy water bowl big enough for the snake to soak in is recommended. Curiously, Ball Pythons are not known to swim in the wild, but they often soak in captivity. This means the water will need to be changed frequently, and the bowl disinfected when the snake passes waste into the water (which is inevitable). If the bowl is toppled or overflows, change the wet substrate quickly.

- **Temperament:** Normally, Ball Pythons are docile, even shy snakes. Rarely does one bite. Occasionally hatchlings are nippy, but these will calm down rapidly with patient handling.

- **Other Notes:** Ball Pythons take their common name from their defensive behavior of rolling up into a tight ball with the head at the center. While other snakes are known to do this, somehow the Ball Python became famous for it.

There is a tremendous difference between the ease of care for wild-caught Ball Pythons and captive-bred ones. Wild Balls often refuse to eat, and it can be very difficult to coax them to take food. Many will need force-feeding under the care of a vet. Some of these animals will end up feeding only on gerbils or hamsters. Captive-bred Ball Pythons exhibit none of these difficulties. Currently, captive-bred Ball Pythons are abundant and not much more expensive than wild-caught ones, so there is no reason to buy a wild-caught Ball.

Recently, captive-bred color varieties of Ball Pythons have become available. They are extremely expensive snakes at the moment, especially the amelanistic specimens, which fetch thousands of dollars each. Ball Pythons have small clutches of eggs and generally only breed once yearly, so the prices of these morphs are likely to stay high for some time.

- **Pet Suitability:** Captive-bred Ball Pythons make excellent, easily cared for pets, suitable for the beginning hobbyist. Because of their feeding difficulties, wild-caught individuals should be purchased only by dedicated herpers. Captive-breds definitely make the best pets of all the pythons. 🌿

- *Pet stores, herp clubs, and show vendors: please feel free to photocopy these Herp Care pages and give them to club members and your customers.*