

Regal Reticulated Pythons

Tips to safely handle, tame and train reticulated pythons.

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The thrill of interacting with a large, tame reticulated python is hard to describe; you truly appreciate their gentle disposition. Although it's easy to become enamored with the sheer size and power of an adult retic, as conscientious keepers we must never forget that these giants command the utmost respect and responsibility. It takes careful consideration, time, energy and resources to raise these serpent gems into giants, but the rewards can be measured in feet.

Size Matters

The reticulated python (*Python reticulatus*) is the longest-growing python species. Captive specimens may exceed 20 feet under the care of a dedicated keeper. The common variety under adequate care may range in size from an 8-foot-long, sexually mature male to a 14- to 16-foot female. Their size potential is incredible, and a 2-foot neonate retic can sprout to an impressive 10 feet or more in 12 months with heavy feeding. We at New England Reptile Distributors encourage prospective keepers to give this serious thought before buying a retic.

Several insular forms of the reticulated python seem to remain smaller, relatively speaking, than their mainland counterparts. These "dwarf" types may be suitable for keepers who anticipate caring for a midsized constrictor. Smaller dwarf forms, such as super dwarfs and Jampea, Selayar and Honey island dwarfs, can range in size from a sexually mature 4- to 5-foot male to reproductive females reaching 6 to 10 feet on average. It is believed these locality-specific animals have adapted to the limitations of an island environment.



Beyond the Hype

Retics are notorious for their strong personalities. We've heard them described as "psycho," a description frequently exaggerated by those who have never kept the species. This misunderstanding comes from a reputation primarily built upon the antics of wild-caught retics. The reality lies in many factors, including the snake's history and how it has been treated.

First and foremost, reticulated pythons are predators, and this plays heavily into the natural behavior of the species. Secondly, these snakes are smart. In fact, they may be the kings of intelligence among constrictors. Retics recognize their keepers and remember negative experiences.

Wild retics are primarily collected for their skins; relatively few wild-caught pythons make it into the pet trade as imports. The treatment they receive after being collected and readied for skinning is often abhorrent. Retics tend to remember the mistreatment they've endured, so by the time one ends up on a dealer's table at a reptile expo, it is often frightened and defensive. At this point the snake may rely on its only defense: biting and thrashing while seeking an escape. Such specimens are best left to experienced snakekeepers.

Retic Psychology

Don't plan on keeping retics unless you first understand the dynamics of their behavior. If a reticulated python bites or acts aggressively, it does so because it fears a factor in its environment, its keeper included. It is the keeper's responsibility to earn the snake's trust. Seemingly always hungry, retics are designed to eat. They have fast metabolisms and may grow quickly. The more you feed the snake, the more it will grow. Less food means slower growth and a smaller snake. Retics always seem to be on the prowl for food, and it's the keeper's responsibility to teach them when, where and what to eat.

Hatchling and juvenile retics tend to be very defensive because they are low on the food chain. From their perspective, everything bigger is a potential predator that wants to eat them, and it is important to be aware of this mind-set when working with them.

If you have the opportunity to work with an experienced reticulated python keeper, we highly recommend you do so before acquiring a retic. Mentorship from a skilled snake handler will help you learn what to expect from a retic of your own.



Establish Trust

Allow your retic a chance to learn through consistent, routine interaction, so the snake may eventually realize that you are not a threat and calm down accordingly. Don't push your retic too quickly, especially if dealing with a wild-caught animal (again, these are not recommended for new keepers of retics). Patience, time and consideration are required to win over some of these "skins that made it."

Captive-bred retics are your best choice for tractable specimens. These animals start life with a greater amount of trust for their keepers and settle well into the established routine of daily husbandry. With the level of success many breeders are enjoying, there is a great selection of captive-produced snakes from which to choose. Additionally, breeders often selectively breed snakes with gentle dispositions, a trait that may be passed on to subsequent generations. Some locality retics, such as the Sulawesi giants, are more nervous as a general rule. You may choose your snake for looks, but more importantly, select it for disposition.

Young, captive-bred retics are the easiest to tame. Once a snake is removed from its cage, hold it in your hands, and allow it to crawl through your fingers. Spending time with a young retic acclimates it to your touch, smell and company. The goal is consistent, positive interaction in which you become a routine part of the snake's daily encounters. During these handling sessions, you want the retic to slowly crawl through your hands or to just lay quietly, and to exhibit long, slow tongue flicks. Handling time helps to build trust and rapport between you and your snake.



Taming Tricks

Reticulated pythons, like all snakes, live in modes: thinking, sleeping, hunting-feeding, breeding and the defensive don't-mess-with-me mode. If you suddenly awaken a sleeping retic, it may instinctively go into feeding mode. In nature, reticulated pythons may locate along game trails, waiting for unsuspecting prey to wander by. These snakes naturally have a hair trigger; they must lay motionless for long periods and instantly react to a prey opportunity. Even in captivity the snake is instinctually preprogrammed to repeat this behavior. The problem in this scenario is that the snake may overreact and wrap around your hand if it's not correctly managed.

Condition your reticulated python by ensuring that it is awake before you enter its enclosure. Tap the cage a few times, and watch for eye movement or activity, which indicate the snake is aware of your presence. Next you must condition the python to realize there is a difference between you and a rodent. A full roll of paper towels works well as a shield on small to midsized snakes. Be certain the snake is awake, open the cage, and hold the roll of paper towels near the snake's face. It will often stick its nose right into the hollow tube to investigate; the trick is to keep the roll between you and the python's business end! Gently give the snake a few firm pats with the roll from midbody down, which is safely away from its mouth. This helps the snake realize it is time for human interaction — not time to eat.

Snake hooks may also be used for the same purpose. Gently move the snake's head and neck away from you, or use the hook to bump or otherwise move the snake to help it understand it is not time to eat. Use caution because some overzealous retics may quickly swing around, or overshoot the paper towel shield or hook. Be aware at all times! This method works well with reasonable snakes, but do not attempt it with large, defensive retics or those of unknown temperament.

When dealing with big snakes, always have another experienced person in the same room or at least within earshot. In the event a retic mistakes its handler for food, the aid of another person makes the removal process much easier. We recommend keeping a bottle of Listerine mouthwash handy to dump in the snake's mouth in case a bite occurs. It often causes the snake to release its grip. The trick is to shut off its feeding response and help it understand that it has not captured prey.

Retics can be smart, but they get excited and make mistakes. Never underestimate them. Although rare, we see news stories entitled "When Pets Go Bad," but often a more appropriate title is "When Pet Owners Turn Stupid." All big snakes command respect during handling, especially while they're being removed from their enclosures.



Handling Tips

You want to interact and handle your retic when it is in the thinking mode. A calm python meanders around its cage with fluid movements and long tongue flicks. A snake that hangs its tongue out and exhibits jerky movements is nervous and defensive.

A nervous handler can easily put a snake into its defensive mode. If you are uncomfortable when handling your snake, use gloves and work to identify and correct the issue, so future handling sessions are positive. If dealing with a skittish retic, do not stare at it; retics are amazingly keyed in on your eyes. Additionally, the human face is a vascular area with a heat signature that provides a target for a nervous snake should it be inclined to bite. Be aware of the snake's movements, and calmly avoid letting the snake get too close to your face. Never position your face or body over a nervous retic because this can easily be mistaken as a threat and potentially result in a serious bite.

Always avoid actions that may cause the snake to mistrust you. Don't grab your retic's tail or the lower length of its body. Rough handling may scare the snake and cause defensive behavior. We generally pick the snake up by the first third of its body and support the animal, so it does not feel like it may fall. Grabbing a retic behind the head quickly makes it lose trust in its handler. If you must restrain a retic by holding it behind the head, be gentle. A sudden grab puts the snake on the defensive, and it may respond by thrashing or biting.

A hungry or defensive retic may strike at any movement outside its enclosure. Avoid causing your python to repeatedly bounce its head off the cage. This is painful, and it may convince the snake you are responsible for its sudden discomfort. Cover the glass if you must, and provide a hide box or limit movements that trigger such behavior.

Respect the teeth! Retics utilize their amazing teeth to secure a variety of prey items. The top part of the jaw is lined with two sets of teeth, and the lower mandible is lined with a single row. The front teeth are longer and designed to strongly secure prey. The top inner row has fewer teeth. Reticulated python teeth are triangular with a bladelike edge on the hind surface, which allows the snake to bite and slash. This type of injury usually occurs when an adult male in breeding mode senses another male's presence and becomes defensive, but it is also a good reminder of the potential seriousness of a retic bite.

Critical Do's and Don'ts

Cages should encourage movement and allow the snake to stretch, thus larger enclosures are preferable. Adult retics enjoy space to sprawl and wander about. A trim 16-foot snake in an enclosure that measures 96 inches long by 30 inches wide by 24 inches tall is reasonable. The larger the snake, the larger the cage must be. An obese, lethargic retic in a small enclosure may be doomed to a shortened life span. It is better to keep retics on the "athletic" side, neither fat nor too thin.

As a rule, retics love to eat. The more they eat, the more they grow. You must ensure that your python doesn't overheat during digestion. A retic's core temperature rises while digesting a large meal, thus a cooler area within the cage ranging between 76 and 82 degrees Fahrenheit is essential. A body temperature higher than 92 degrees can become life-threatening to your snake. The cage's warm side should be about 90 degrees. An overall ambient temperature of 80 to 84 is ideal. After consuming a large meal your retic must have access to ample fresh water, which is critical to the digestive process. The water dish should be large enough for the snake to soak in it.

Smaller retics have an amazing compulsion to pace their cages while seeking food. They may rub their mouths and develop the dreaded "fang face." This condition results from the snake repeatedly pressing its delicate nose and mouth against fixed objects, causing tissue to swell and become inflamed. The snake may continue rubbing until small wounds appear, allowing a bacterial infection to manifest. Without a change in caging and possible antibiotics, this can spread into the teeth and bone, causing a systemic, life-threatening infection. This condition is fairly common with young retics, wild-caught animals and some dwarfs in particular. Provide crumpled newspaper, which creates some distraction and gives the snake plenty of places to hide. Giving it things to explore in its enclosure also helps it combat the compulsion to rub against the cage.

Never keep two male retics together once they are more than 3 feet in length because fatal injuries may result. Use caution during breeding season while handling multiple males, and be aware of their behavior. If you smell like one male and handle another, he may decide he wants you out of his territory and react accordingly. This also applies when moving a breeding-sized female from one male's enclosure to the next. Be careful, and do not assume the male knows a rival male has not entered the cage. If your mature male has a reduced appetite, wrestles with you, and/or paces and pushes against the cage, he most likely wants to breed. Handle him with care because elevated hormone levels may make him unusually high-strung for a time.

It is up to the handler to ensure the snake feels secure. With time, patience and effort, your retic can become a tame animal that is a pleasure to interact with.



Jungle Platinum



Tiger Platinum



Jampea Dwarf generally ranges in sizes from 5-10 feet



Dwarf insular lineages with their associated genes may help ensure that these snakes never exceed 10 feet.