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SNAKES

Children's Python

Antaresia childreni

Antaresia childreni is a small, nocturnal python from northern Australia. It reaches 80-120 cm, is calm, hardy and eats willingly, which makes it one of the most suitable pythons for new snake keepers. It is long-lived and tolerates both dry and humid air, but it is a skilled escape artist.

Family: Pythonidae Former name: *Liasis childreni; Antaresia stimsoni*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**80-120 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**20-30 years**
Active	**At night**
Lifestyle	**Rock-dwelling and terrestrial**
Habitat	**Semi-desert, savanna and rocky terrain**
Difficulty	**Beginner**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**90 × 45 × 45 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**24-29 °C**
Basking spot	**32-35 °C**
Temperature, night	**20-24 °C**
Humidity	**20-80%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Recommended** Ferguson zone 2
Diet	**Vertebrates**
Kept	**Singly**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Sexually mature	**18-36 months**
Clutch size	**8-12 eggs**
Incubation	**45-49 days** at 31 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

CITES	**Appendix II**
EU annex	**Annex B**
IUCN	**Least Concern (LC)**

About the species

Antaresia childreni is a slender to moderately stout python with a narrow head, a vertical pupil and heat-sensitive pits along the lips. The body is slightly compressed, the tail short, and there are small spurs beside the vent. The ground colour is reddish brown to brown with darker blotches, which are most distinct in young animals. The scales have a slight iridescent sheen in sunlight. The young are heavily blotched and gradually become uniform in colour with age.

Adults usually measure 80-120 cm including the tail, but the range runs from about 70 cm to nearly 150 cm. The smallest animals occur in the form that was formerly treated as *Antaresia stimsoni*. It has stronger and more variable colours, with reddish-brown to chocolate-brown blotches on a pale sandy ground. In 2021 the two were merged into one species, because they form a gradual genetic transition and are difficult to tell apart. Care is the same for both forms, and many of the figures for care and breeding come from the form that was formerly called *A. stimsoni*.

The species name was given in memory of John George Children, a British entomologist who worked at the British Museum. The genus name *Antaresia* refers to the star Antares. The species was first described in 1842.

A. childreni is calm, seldom aggressive and has a strong feeding response. It can live for more than 30 years, and colour variants such as albino, leucistic and melanistic exist in captivity. This guide deals with the species, not the morphs.

Distribution and habitat

Antaresia childreni lives across large parts of Australia. The northern form is found in the far north of Western Australia, the northern third of the Northern Territory, northern Queensland and on the islands of the Torres Strait. The form formerly regarded as *A. stimsoni* covers large parts of inland Australia from Queensland and New South Wales to South Australia and Western Australia.

The type locality is unknown.

> **Native range:** Australia.

HABITAT

Antaresia childreni lives in many habitat types: forest, savanna, scrub, desert, grassland and freshwater wetlands. It is associated with rocky outcrops, caves and crevices, preferably with water nearby, and it also climbs in trees and bushes. It is nocturnal and spends the day in hiding. Animals living in caves catch bats in flight by hanging from the ceiling.

The prey is lizards, frogs, small mammals and birds. Activity is greatest at the end of the wet season (February-April) in northern Australia. The climate ranges from tropical, with a distinct wet and dry season, in the north to dry and variable in the interior.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

An adult *Antaresia childreni* needs an enclosure of at least 90 × 45 × 45 cm (length × width × height). The enclosure should be at least as long as the snake, so that it can stretch out fully, and tall enough for heat lamps and UVB tubes to be used safely. Young snakes can be kept in small boxes with several hides, but larger enclosures give more options for regulating the temperature.

Furnish with at least two hides that fit snugly around the snake, one at the warm end and one at the cool end. Add a humid hide with lightly dampened sphagnum or substrate, flat stones, cork bark and branches. The species climbs a little, so the branches must be firmly fixed. Stacks of stones must be glued and secured so that they cannot slip and crush the snake, and there must be access to the snake inside the stack.

Use a loose substrate of 5-8 cm, for example aspen shavings, sand or a mixture of soil, sand and clay. The snake likes to burrow into it. Hard surfaces such as kitchen paper are used only in quarantine. Avoid sticky tape in the enclosure.

The enclosure must be completely escape-proof, preferably with front doors and tight joints. The young are very small and slip out through the smallest gaps. The snake is kept alone, except during the breeding season, when two males must never be together.

Read more: Lighting and UVB Read more: Quarantine and hygiene

TEMPERATURE

The enclosure must have a distinct gradient. The basking spot and the warm hide must be 32-35 °C. The cool side must be 24-29 °C. At night the temperature must be 20-24 °C and must not stay below 20 °C for long. Young under one year need heat around the clock and a smaller gradient of about 25-34 °C.

Use a heat lamp to create a basking spot, preferably two or more lamps, so that the whole coiled snake can be warmed evenly. A warm hide can be made with a heat mat under a stone, controlled by a thermostat with the probe in the hide. The snake must never be able to coil around or touch a heat source, as this causes serious burns. Measure the temperatures with an infrared thermometer and digital probes.

Winter rest benefits the species and improves breeding success: the night temperature is lowered gradually over 6-8 weeks in winter. Snakes that are ill or underweight must not be given a winter rest.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

A. childreni is not fussy about humidity and tolerates 20-80 %. Shedding problems are most often caused by incorrect temperature, not humidity. Humidity is highest on the cool side and at night, and lowest by the heat.

A humid hide at the cool end and a little misting in the morning are enough. A small bowl of fresh water should be available at all times, in a heavy bowl that does not tip over. The water is changed daily, and the bowl is scrubbed weekly with a disinfectant for animals.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation Read more: Common diseases and signs of illness

LIGHTING AND UVB

The species is nocturnal, but it needs a fixed day-night rhythm. The light is switched on for 12 hours a day in summer and turned down to about 10 hours in winter, controlled by a timer.

The species can live without UVB, but UVB is recommended because it regulates the daily rhythm and hormones and gives the snake all the vitamin D it needs. The species belongs to Ferguson zone 2. Use a T5 HO tube of 5-6 %, covering the whole length of the basking spot and positioned over the warm area. Aim for a UV index of 2-3 at the snake's back on the surface of the basking spot. With the tube over a mesh the distance is about 25-33 cm, without a mesh about 35-43 cm. Replace the tube every 12 months, even if it still lights up.

FEEDING

Antaresia childreni eats mice and small rats of a size that suits the snake. Prey should be thawed and warmed to 32-38 °C in a bag in warm water. Use feeding tongs with soft tips, because the snake strikes hard. Preferably offer frozen and thawed animals rather than live ones.

Young snakes are fed every 7-10 days, adults every 2-3 weeks. The prey should weigh about 10 % of the snake's weight or be 1-1.5 times as wide as the snake at its widest point. If the snake is too fat, use smaller prey; if it is too thin, feed more often. Some animals are so eager that they become obese, so weigh them and look at the body shape regularly. Adults can go off food for weeks and sometimes for up to six months, especially in winter. Avoid feeding if the snake has been too cold, because the food may rot in the stomach.

Variation in prey is an advantage: in the wild young animals take mainly lizards and frogs, while adults also take rodents, bats and birds. Young snakes are sometimes difficult to get onto mice, and some must be offered small lizards at first. At every 4th-6th meal the prey can be lightly dusted with a combined calcium and vitamin supplement.

Read more: Calcium, vitamins and supplements

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

A. childreni is calm and tolerates handling, but young animals are nervous and may bite or rear up and strike. They get used to handling. Leave a new snake in peace for about two weeks, and begin handling it only once it is feeding regularly. Start with no more than 5 minutes at a time, and return the snake to the enclosure when it is calm. After that, handle it at least once a week and no more than once a day.

Let the snake crawl onto your hand rather than grabbing it, and support as much of the body as possible. Use slow movements. Do not handle it in the first few days after a meal or when it is shedding and has milky blue eyes. The snake seldom bites, but it is very food-eager, so wash your hands first so that they do not smell of prey.

Snakes hide illness. A check-up by a vet with reptile experience every 6-12 months is a good habit.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

Sexing is done with a probe and must be carried out by an experienced person or a vet, because incorrect use can cause serious injury. The difference between the sexes is small, but females grow slightly longer and heavier. Males are sexually mature after about 18 months and then weigh 120-300 g, but some males mature very early and small. Females are usually at least 3 years old and 350-500 g before they lay for the first time.

MATING

The species breeds readily. Mating is triggered by a cool period in winter: the night temperature is lowered gradually to about 22 °C for 6-8 weeks, while the daytime temperature is kept at about 27 °C and the basking spot of 30-32 °C is switched on only during the day. The pairs are put together a couple of weeks into the period. The night temperature is then raised gradually again. Matings continue for six to eight weeks.

Males must not be kept together during the breeding season, because they fight and can injure each other. Some males go off food while they are ready to breed.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

Ovulation is seen as a distinct swelling in the rear part of the body and lasts 8-12 hours, so it is easily overlooked. The female sheds a few days later, and the eggs are laid 21-30 days after the shed. The female often loses her appetite before ovulation.

The clutch is 8-12 eggs, and in rare cases it can be up to 25. The female coils around the eggs and shivers now and then to keep them warm. She is a careful mother.

INCUBATION

The eggs can stay with the female or be moved to an incubator. If they are moved, the eggs are placed in a tall container with lightly dampened vermiculite in the position in which they were laid. The incubation temperature is about 31 °C, and the eggs hatch after 45-49 days, or after about 7 weeks with the female. The humidity in the incubator is not documented.

The young emerge from the egg within a day after cutting a slit in the shell.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

Newly hatched young weigh about 8 g and are very small. Keep them individually in small, escape-proof boxes with kitchen paper as substrate, and keep some of the paper damp so that the first shed goes well. It happens 9-14 days after hatching. Cannibalism has been seen among young, so they must be separated immediately.

The first feeding begins a couple of weeks after the first shed. The hardest part of rearing the species is getting the young onto mice, because in the wild they eat lizards and frogs. Small lizards or frogs may be necessary at first.

Health and common mistakes

Antaresia childreni is hardy, and most problems are caused by incorrect temperature or feeding. Typical problems are:

- Wheezing breathing, mucus or an open mouth. This requires a vet.
- Difficult sheds. They are most often caused by incorrect temperature, less often by incorrect humidity.
- Regurgitation, when the snake is fed without enough warmth afterwards or handled too soon after a meal.
- Obesity, because many animals accept all the food they are offered.
- Longer periods without appetite outside the cool months, lethargy, diarrhoea and abnormal movements.
- Burns from direct contact with a heat source.

Contact a vet with reptile experience if the snake shows any of the signs above or loses noticeable weight. New animals are kept apart from other reptiles for a quarantine period before they are put together with the rest of the collection.

Always ask someone who knows

This guide is a good place to start, but it cannot replace experience. Animals differ, and much of what matters most is learned from people who have kept the species for years. Talk to a breeder, an experienced keeper or a vet who knows reptiles and amphibians before you get the animal - and again if anything looks wrong.