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SNAKES

Pygmy Python

Antaresia perthensis

Antaresia perthensis is a nocturnal python from north-western Australia and the smallest python in the world. It reaches 40-60 cm and weighs about 200 g as an adult. It is calm and needs a small but fully escape-proof enclosure. The hardest part is getting the very small young to eat mice, because in the wild they feed on small lizards.

Family: Pythonidae

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**40-60 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**20-30 years**
Active	**At night**
Lifestyle	**Rock-dwelling and terrestrial**
Habitat	**Semi-desert and rocky terrain**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**60 × 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**
Clutch size	**5-8 eggs**
Incubation	**50-60 days** at 31 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Antaresia perthensis is a slender little python with a narrow head, a vertical pupil and heat-sensitive pits on the lower lip scales. There are no pits on the tip of the snout. The body is slightly compressed, the tail short, and there are small spurs beside the vent. The ground colour is reddish brown with irregular darker blotches, which often form broad crossbands. In adults the blotches become less distinct. This sets the species apart from *Antaresia childreni* and *Antaresia maculosa*, which have a paler background and a clearer pattern throughout life.

Adults are usually about 40-50 cm long including the tail, and at most 60 cm, so the species is smaller than any other python. An adult weighs about 200 g. Newly hatched young are about 20 cm long and weigh about 4 g, and after a year they weigh about 25 g. Lifespan in captivity is not documented for the species; 20-30 years is borrowed from its close relatives in the genus.

The species was described in 1932. The species name *perthensis* means "from Perth", but the first specimen was wrongly believed to come from Perth, and the species does not occur anywhere near the city. The genus name *Antaresia* refers to the star Antares.

Distribution and habitat

Antaresia perthensis is found in north-western Western Australia, in the Pilbara region and the adjoining Gascoyne and Murchison areas, and on some islands along the coast. The type locality, Perth, is an error, and the original collecting site is unknown.

Australia does not allow the export of wild reptiles, so all animals in the trade are captive-bred.

Read more: Buying animals: captive-bred, wild-caught and transport

> **Native range:** Australia.

HABITAT

Antaresia perthensis lives in rocky country and scrub in a hot, dry climate. It is nocturnal and is often found at termite mounds, where it probably also shelters inside the tunnels. It spends the day hidden away.

Its prey is small lizards, especially geckos.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

Little is known about the care of *Antaresia perthensis* specifically. It is kept like its closest relatives *Antaresia childreni*, *Antaresia maculosa* and *Antaresia stimsoni*, and the figures for temperature, humidity, lighting and breeding are borrowed from them unless stated otherwise.

An adult *A. perthensis* needs an enclosure of at least 60 × 45 × 45 cm (length × width × height). The enclosure must 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. Larger enclosures are an advantage as long as there are plenty of hides and the furnishings are dense, because a snake of 40-60 cm can lose itself in a large, open enclosure. Young snakes are kept in small, escape-proof boxes with several hides.

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, flat stones, cork bark and sturdy branches. Stacks of stones must be glued together and fixed in place so that they cannot shift and crush the snake, and it must be possible to reach the snake, even between the stones. Avoid sticky tape in the enclosure.

Use a loose substrate 3-5 cm deep, for example aspen shavings, sand or a mixture of soil, sand and clay. The snake likes to burrow into it. Firm substrates such as kitchen roll are used only in quarantine and for the smallest young.

The enclosure must be completely escape-proof, preferably with front-opening doors and tight joints. Young snakes are so small that they can slip out through the tiniest gaps, and mesh or wire fronts are not suitable for snakes. The snake is kept alone, and two males must never be together in the breeding season.

Read more: Lighting and UVB Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation Read more: Quarantine and hygiene

TEMPERATURE

The enclosure needs a clear gradient. The basking spot and the warm hide should be 32-35 °C. The cool side should be 24-29 °C. At night the temperature should be 20-24 °C and should not stay below 20 °C for long. Young snakes under a year old need warmth around the clock and a smaller gradient of about 25-34 °C.

Use a low-wattage heat lamp for the basking spot, so that the whole coiled snake can be warmed evenly. A warm hide can be made with a small 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, because this causes serious burns. Measure temperatures with an infrared thermometer and digital probes. A small enclosure quickly becomes too hot, so check the temperature every time the lamp or thermostat is changed.

A cool period in winter, with the night temperature lowered gradually over 6-8 weeks, gives better breeding results. Sick or underweight snakes must not be put through a winter cool-down.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

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

A humid hide at the cool end and a little misting in the morning are enough. Fresh water must be available at all times in a small, heavy bowl that cannot tip over. The water is changed daily, and the bowl is scrubbed weekly with an animal-safe disinfectant.

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 on for 12 hours a day in summer and reduced to about 10 hours in winter, controlled by a timer.

The species can survive without UVB, but UVB is recommended because it supports the daily rhythm and the snake's own production of vitamin D. The species belongs to Ferguson zone 2. Use a T5 HO tube of 5-6 % that covers the whole basking area and sits over the warm end. Aim for a UV index of 2-3 at the snake's back at the basking spot. With the tube over mesh, the distance is about 25-33 cm; without mesh, about 35-43 cm. Replace the tube every 12 months, even if it still lights up.

FEEDING

Antaresia perthensis is so small that its food must be chosen with care. Adults take small mice, for example pinkies and fuzzies, and large prey puts a strain on the snake even if it tries to eat it. In the wild, young snakes take small lizards, especially geckos, and often have to be coaxed into taking pinkies. Prey must be thawed and warmed to 32-38 °C in a bag in warm water. Use long feeding tweezers, and offer frozen and thawed animals rather than live ones.

Young snakes are fed every 7-10 days, adults every 1-3 weeks. Prey should weigh no more than about 10 % of the snake's weight, or be no wider than the snake at its widest point. If the snake is too fat, use smaller prey; if it is too thin, feed more often. Many animals accept all the food they are offered and become fat, so weigh them and check their body shape regularly. Adults can go off their food for weeks and sometimes longer, especially in winter and in the breeding season. Avoid feeding a snake that has been too cold or that cannot get warm after the meal, because the food can rot in the stomach.

Most young snakes can be teased into striking if the prey is moved gently in front of them with the tweezers. 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. perthensis is calm and tolerates handling, but young animals can be nervous and bite. Most 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 a few minutes at a time, and return the snake to the enclosure when it is calm.

Let the snake crawl onto your hand rather than grabbing it, and support its body. Use slow movements, and never grip the snake so that it cannot move. Do not handle it for the first few days after a meal or when it is shedding and has milky-blue eyes. Wash your hands first, so that they do not smell of prey, because the snake is very food-driven. The species is so small that it can easily slip out of a hand and can be injured if dropped or squeezed.

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

Sex is determined with a probe and must be done by an experienced person or a vet, because incorrect use can cause serious injury. In this genus the females are usually slightly longer and heavier, but size depends greatly on feeding. Age and weight at sexual maturity are not documented for the species. In *Antaresia childreni* and *Antaresia maculosa* the males are sexually mature after about 18 months, while the females first lay eggs after about 3 years; the small weight thresholds in those figures do not suit *A. perthensis*, which is far smaller.

MATING

In this genus, breeding 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. The pairs are put together a couple of weeks into the period, and the night temperature is then raised gradually again. The figures are borrowed from the close relatives and are not

documented for the species itself.

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

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

Ovulation shows as a clear swelling in the rear part of the body and is brief, so it can easily be missed. The female sheds a few days later, and the eggs are laid some weeks after the shed. The female usually stops eating while she is carrying eggs.

The clutch is 5-8 eggs. The female coils around the eggs and lifts them off the substrate until the young hatch.

INCUBATION

The eggs can stay with the female or be moved to an incubator. If they are moved, they are laid with the same side up as when they were laid, in a small container with lightly dampened vermiculite. The eggs hatch after 50-60 days. The incubation temperature is about 31 °C; this figure is borrowed from *Antaresia childreni* and *Antaresia maculosa*. Humidity in the incubator is not documented.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

Newly hatched young are about 20 cm long and weigh about 4 g, so they are very small. Keep them singly in small, escape-proof boxes with kitchen roll as substrate, and keep a little of the paper damp so that the first shed goes well. In this genus it happens 9-14 days after hatching.

The first feed is offered a couple of weeks after the first shed. The hardest part of rearing is getting the young to take pinkies, because in the wild they eat small lizards. Most can be teased into striking if the prey is moved gently in front of them with the tweezers.

Health and common mistakes

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

- Wheezing breathing, mucus or an open mouth. This needs 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.
- Serpentovirus, which is widespread among captive pythons. It causes respiratory disease with mucus and an open mouth, the infection does not clear, and infected pythons die more often than others. New animals are quarantined and tested by a vet before they come near other pythons.

Contact a vet with reptile experience if the snake shows any of the signs above or loses noticeable weight. Keep new animals in quarantine for at least six months in a separate room that does not share air with the other reptiles. Care for them last, and wash your hands and equipment thoroughly afterwards.

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.