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SNAKES

Black-headed Python

Aspidites melanocephalus

Aspidites melanocephalus is a powerful, nocturnal python from northern Australia with a glossy black head and a black neck. It grows to 150-200 cm, lacks the heat-sensing pits that otherwise characterise pythons, and in the wild lives mostly on lizards and other snakes. All animals in the trade are captive-bred. It is calm, but can eat other snakes and must be kept alone.

Family: Pythonidae Former name: *Aspidiotes melanocephalus*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**150-200 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**20-30 years**
Active	**At night**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial and burrowing**
Habitat	**Semi-desert and savanna**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**180 × 90 × 60 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**26-28 °C**
Basking spot	**33-35 °C**
Temperature, night	**22-25 °C**
Humidity	**50-70%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Optional** Ferguson zone 1
Diet	**Vertebrates**
Kept	**Singly**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Sexually mature	**30-60 months**
Clutch size	**6-20 eggs**
Incubation	**58-65 days** at 30-32 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Aspidites melanocephalus is a muscular, slightly flattened python with smooth, glossy scales, 50-65 rows at midbody, and large, symmetrical shields on the head. The head is barely wider than the neck, and the tail ends in a thin point. The species name *melanocephalus* comes from Greek and means black-headed. The genus lacks the heat-sensing pits along the lips that most other pythons have.

The head, neck and throat are glossy black, and the black extends a little way down the neck. The rest of the body is sandy brown, yellow or reddish brown with irregular dark brown bands that often run together along the back and give a striped appearance. The belly is white to pink and may have dark spots. Animals from Western Australia are paler and redder than animals from the Northern Territory and Queensland, which have darker and more distinct bands. Older animals are paler and less distinctly marked than young ones.

Adults are most often 150-200 cm long including the tail, and females grow about 30 cm longer than males. A few animals reach 300-350 cm. Newly hatched young are about 60 cm. The species was described in 1864. The similar *Aspidites ramsayi* does not have the completely black head and the black neck. There are no recognised subspecies. In captivity there are also bred morphs; the guide deals with the species, not the morphs.

Aspidites melanocephalus is calm and can usually be handled without problems. It hisses loudly when disturbed but rarely bites and most often strikes with a closed mouth. It is not venomous.

Distribution and habitat

Aspidites melanocephalus lives in the northern third of Australia, from west to east through Western Australia, the Northern Territory and northern Queensland. It avoids the very driest regions. The type locality is Bowen in Queensland.

The species is regarded as widespread and locally common, but it is rarely seen. It is classified as not threatened. Australia does not permit 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

Aspidites melanocephalus is found from humid tropical country to semi-arid regions, mostly in dry scrub and savanna, but also in denser forest and on farmland. It is ground-dwelling and nocturnal and spends most of its time in burrows, either self-dug or abandoned, and in termite mounds. Here the temperature stays more even than on the surface. It can climb and is occasionally seen in trees. It swims well but is almost never found in water.

The black head probably helps to regulate temperature: the snake can stick out only its head from the burrow and thus keep the rest of the body hidden. The prey is mostly lizards, especially skinks, and also geckos, agamids, legless lizards and snakes, including other *A. melanocephalus*. Mammals and birds are taken less often. The prey is killed by constriction, and large prey is swallowed after one or two coils directly in front of the distended mouth. Adults have almost no natural enemies apart from dingoes.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

An adult *Aspidites melanocephalus* needs an enclosure of at least 180 × 90 × 60 cm (length × width × height). The species grows larger than *Aspidites ramsayi* and is active, so larger is better. The enclosure must be secure and have a safe lid, because the snake is strong. Juveniles can be kept in small boxes with water and a hide.

A tight, dark hide is the most important furnishing. Put a hide at each end so that the snake can choose between the warm and the cool side, and place the hide over the basking spot. A large hide with a humid substrate of half coconut soil and half sand keeps the snake content and helps during shedding. Coconut chips or aspen, which tolerate a little moisture, or a mixture of sand and soil, work as substrate. Otherwise the substrate is kept relatively dry.

The snake is kept alone. The species has cannibalistic tendencies, so two animals may be together only during mating.

Read more: Heat and temperature

TEMPERATURE

The enclosure must have a clear gradient. The cool side should be 26-28 °C, and the basking spot 33-35 °C. At night the temperature may fall to 22-25 °C (the figure is borrowed from *Aspidites ramsayi*). The snake must always be able to choose between a warm and a cool zone.

Heat is provided with a heat mat or heat tape at one end, controlled by a thermostat. A heat lamp can be used for about 8 hours a day over half of the enclosure. The snake must not be able to touch a heat source. Measure the temperature with digital probes and an infrared thermometer.

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Humidity should be 50-70% (the figure is borrowed from *Aspidites ramsayi*). Ventilation must be good, and the substrate must not be wet, because constant moisture causes blisters and scale rot. A coconut bark substrate can be misted lightly if the air becomes too dry.

Provide water in a drinking bowl that is so small that the snake cannot lie in it. The snake likes misting and readily raises its head to lick the droplets. During shedding the humid hide helps.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

The species is nocturnal and does not require UVB. Weak UVB (Ferguson zone 1) can be used as long as there are hides and shade; the recommendation is borrowed from related nocturnal pythons. Use a timer and a dark night.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

Adults readily take rats, and they are given frozen and thawed, because this is safer for both snake and keeper. The prey is placed at the opposite end of the enclosure, for example on a paper plate, and the snake must be allowed peace to eat; otherwise it becomes nervous or guards the food. The prey should be about as wide as the snake's thickest part.

The species is a heavy feeder. Adult males get two small to medium-sized rats every 10 days, adult females three to four. Body shape and weight determine whether the portion should be adjusted, because overfeeding causes disease and a shorter life and does not make the animals ready for breeding sooner. Juveniles are fed more often on newborn to small mice. The snake is always fed in its own enclosure so that it does not associate handling with food.

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Aspidites melanocephalus is calm and easy to handle but can strike with a closed mouth when it feels threatened. Juveniles and snakes in shed, when the eyes are covered, are the quietest. The snake is inquisitive at night and likes to dig in the substrate. Leave a new snake in peace until it eats regularly, and do not handle it for the first few days after a meal.

Hook training helps: the snake is given a gentle tap on the head with a snake hook before it is taken out, and in this way learns that it is now time for handling and not food.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

Females grow larger than males. The species is sexually mature after 4-5 years, but males can be used for breeding from the age of 2.5 years. Breeding animals should be well grown, because young animals have less success with breeding, and large females lay larger clutches.

MATING

Breeding requires a cool period. From about the middle of November the animals get no more food, and the heat is kept unchanged until the intestines are empty; otherwise digestive problems can occur. Three weeks after the last meal the heat mat is switched off at night, so that the night temperature is 20-21 °C, while the daytime temperature and the basking spot are maintained. After a further three weeks the male is put in with the female, and the night temperature is lowered a little more. Mating can last from 20 minutes to 6 hours. The male is removed when he no longer shows interest.

The males are less aggressive than in most pythons, but fighting and biting can occur. In warmer climates the cycle can be started two to three months earlier. After three years of breeding in a row the female must have a year off.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female lays about 60 days after ovulation and about 30 days after the shed that follows ovulation. A clutch is 6-20 eggs, and larger females lay more. In the wild the female coils around the eggs and incubates them. In captivity the eggs are removed only when she has completely finished laying.

INCUBATION

The eggs are moved to the incubator without being turned. They are placed on a rack over a bed of quilt wadding in a box with holes, so that humidity is controlled in the box and not in the whole incubator. Humidity is 70-80%, and water that condenses on the lid is wiped away so that it does not drip onto the eggs. Eggs that come into contact with moisture go

mouldy. The incubation temperature of 30-32 °C is borrowed from *Aspidites ramsayi*. The eggs hatch after 58-65 days.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

Young are about 60 cm at hatching and can catch prey after just two days. They are kept singly in small boxes with water and a hide and are fed on newborn to small mice.

Health and common mistakes

Aspidites melanocephalus is hardy but requires a dry, clean enclosure and an appropriate weight. Typical problems are:

- Blisters and scale rot from humidity that is too high or a wet substrate.
- Obesity, because the species eats readily.
- Poor sheds from incorrect temperature or humidity.
- Burns from contact with a heat source.
- Digestive problems if the intestines have not been emptied before the cool period.
- Respiratory disease with mucus and open mouth, loss of appetite, lethargy and weight loss. This requires a vet with experience in reptiles.

Quarantine new animals, and keep them apart from other reptiles.

Read more: Quarantine and hygiene

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.