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SNAKES

Woma Python

Aspidites ramsayi

Aspidites ramsayi is a calm, nocturnal desert python from inland and western Australia. It reaches 140-170 cm, lacks the heat-sensitive pits that otherwise characterise pythons, and in the wild lives on lizards, small mammals and birds. It feeds readily in captivity and is hardy, but needs an enclosure with a dry substrate, a deep layer to dig in and a snug, dark hide.

Family: Pythonidae Former name: *Aspidiotes ramsayi; Aspidites collaris; Aspidites melanocephalus ramsayi*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**140-170 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**15-25 years**
Active	**At night**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial and burrowing**
Habitat	**Desert and semi-desert**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**120 × 60 × 45 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**26-29 °C**
Basking spot	**31-33 °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	**24-48 months**
Clutch size	**5-20 eggs**
Incubation	**60-75 days** at 30-32 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Aspidites ramsayi is a stout, smooth and slightly flattened python with a narrow head, small eyes and a tail that ends in a thin tip. The body is covered in small, smooth scales, 50-65 rows at midbody, and the head has large, symmetrical shields. The genus name *Aspidites* means "shield-bearer" and refers to exactly these. The genus lacks the heat-sensitive pits along the lips that most other pythons have.

The ground colour ranges from light brown, olive and orange to pink and red, with darker bands or a marbled pattern. The head and neck are usually uniformly yellow to yellow-brown, and there are dark patches around the eyes and on the snout. The belly is cream to pale yellow with brown and pinkish spots. *A. ramsayi* is told from the close relative *Aspidites melanocephalus* by lacking the all-black head and black neck.

Adults are usually 140-170 cm long including the tail, but animals from the southern part of the range can reach about 240 cm and weigh over 4.5 kg. The species was described in 1882 and is named after the Australian zoologist Edward Pierson Ramsay. It has at times been regarded as a subspecies of *A. melanocephalus*, but is now a species in its own right. In captivity

there are both natural colour forms and bred morphs; this guide deals with the species, not the morphs.

A. ramsayi is one of the calmest pythons in the enclosure. It is more active than many other pythons, feeds readily and breeds well in captivity.

Distribution and habitat

Aspidites ramsayi is tied to dry areas in western and central Australia. It occurs in Western Australia from the Pilbara region near Port Hedland down along the coast and the inland sand plains to the area between Geraldton and Perth and east towards Kalgoorlie. Further east the range runs through the southern Northern Territory and northern South Australia to south-western and central Queensland and north-western New South Wales. The type locality is Fort Bourke in New South Wales.

The range is fragmented. The species has disappeared from large parts of its former range in the south and east, especially from the farmland of south-western Western Australia, where no records have been confirmed since 1989. On the IUCN Red List the species is regarded as not threatened, but several local populations are critically endangered. Australia does not permit the export of wild reptiles, so all animals in trade are captive-bred.

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

> **Native range:** Australia.

HABITAT

Aspidites ramsayi lives in dry country with sandy or clay soil: red sand desert with spinifex and scrub, thickets, sand plains and dry open woodland. It is nocturnal and spends the day hidden in hollow logs, under dead leaves and branches, in cavities under grass tussocks and especially in burrows in the ground, where it uses the burrows of other animals. Earth burrows are the most important resource in its habitat, because they keep an even, cool temperature, even when the surface is over 40 °C in summer or falls below freezing in winter.

At night the snake hunts both on the surface and down in burrows. Prey is mostly reptiles such as lizards and snakes, but also small mammals and ground-living birds. It catches much of its prey in narrow tunnels where there is no room to coil around it; here it presses a loop of its body against the prey and holds it against the wall. Many adults therefore bear scars from prey that managed to defend itself. The climate is dry with very hot summers, cold winter nights and little, irregular rain.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

An adult needs an enclosure of at least 120 × 60 × 45 cm (length × width × height); the minimum is borrowed from pythons of similar size. The snake is active and likes to move, so larger is better. The enclosure must have firm, tight joints and a secure lid or door locks, because *Aspidites ramsayi* is strong and seeks out gaps. Young can be kept in smaller boxes but must have at least two hides.

A snug, dark hide is the most important furnishing. The species is a burrowing, nocturnal snake and does better when it can crawl into a tight space. Put a hide at each end, so the snake can choose between warm and cooler conditions, and preferably add a humid hide with lightly dampened sphagnum, used only for shedding. Large, fixed stones and cork bark give variety. Stacks of stones must be glued fast so they cannot shift and crush the snake.

A loose mixture of sand and soil in a layer of 8-10 cm works as substrate, so the snake can dig down, but the substrate must be kept dry. Aspen shavings, newspaper and reptile carpet are simple alternatives, especially in quarantine. The snake is kept alone; never keep two males together.

Read more: Quarantine and hygiene

TEMPERATURE

The enclosure must have a clear gradient. By day the cool end must be 26-29 °C, and the hot spot must be 31-33 °C. At night the temperature may fall to 22-25 °C. The species tolerates cooler conditions than many other pythons, because in the wild it spends most of its time in cool earth burrows, but it must always be able to choose a warm zone, so it can warm up for digestion and shedding.

Heat can be provided with a heat mat under or at one end of the enclosure, controlled by a thermostat with the probe at the surface. An extra heat lamp is unnecessary if the heat mat is large enough. The snake must never be able to touch a heat source, because this causes serious burns. Measure temperature with digital probes and an infrared thermometer. The night temperature is not documented for the species and is borrowed from pythons with a similar habitat.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Aspidites ramsayi comes from dry regions but spends the day in earth burrows, where the air is more humid than on the surface. Humidity in the enclosure must be 50-70 %, and the substrate must be dry. Higher humidity causes blisters on the skin and encourages bacteria that can lead to scale rot, so ventilation must be good. A small bowl of fresh water that the snake cannot lie in is normally enough to maintain humidity; change the water regularly.

Young need slightly higher humidity and must always have fresh water. During a shed humidity is raised to 80-90 %, for example with a humid hide. Snakes from earth burrows get moisture from the soil, so a humid hide can also help adults that shed poorly.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

The species is nocturnal and does not require UVB, but weak UVB is an advantage. It belongs to Ferguson zone 1. Use a weak T5 UVB tube of 5 % over one half of the enclosure, so the UV index closest to the lamp is about 1 at most, and there are always dark hides and shade. The recommendation is borrowed from related nocturnal pythons.

Keep the light on for 12 hours in summer and 10 hours in winter, controlled by a timer. The night must be dark.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

Aspidites ramsayi has a strong feeding response and readily takes mice, rats and chicks. Give frozen and thawed animals, warmed to about 35 °C, and use long feeding tongs, because the snake strikes hard and may swallow the tip of the tongs along with the prey. Hold on firmly and let go only when the snake has hold. The prey should weigh about 10 % of the snake's weight or be as wide as the thickest part of the snake.

Young are fed every 7-10 days with pinkies to small mice once the first shed is over, and adults every 2-3 weeks with rats. The feeding pattern is borrowed from pythons of similar size. The species easily becomes overweight, because it almost never refuses food, so weigh it and watch the body shape; cut back if it becomes too fat. A few animals refuse food for weeks all the same, especially females in the mating season and animals that have just been moved. Keep the hide dark then and leave the animal in peace.

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Aspidites ramsayi is calm, active and gets used to handling easily. Young can be a little nervous, and the feeding response is strong even in the calm animals, so wash your hands before handling the snake, and do not take it out right after a meal. A few young are bitey and remain so as adults. Leave a new snake in peace for a couple of weeks until it feeds regularly, and then handle it calmly and support the body with both hands. Do not handle it in the first days after a meal or during a shed.

The snake often explores at night and likes to dig in the substrate. It hides illness, so a check-up with a vet with reptile experience once a year 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. Females become larger than males. Males can breed from about two years, females from two to three years, when they are fully grown and in good condition. Females that are too young or too thin should not be put into breeding.

MATING

A cool period stimulates mating. The night temperature is lowered by about 5 °C by switching the heat mat off at night, and the day temperature is kept slightly lower than normal. The period stretches over 3-5 months from autumn, for example from October or November. The male is put in with the female and mates with her through most of the period. Towards the end the snakes become less interested in each other, and the male can be removed.

A mating does not always mean that the female lays eggs. Unlike other pythons, the female apparently does not ovulate before mating, so it is only after a successful mating that she becomes visibly thicker at the rear.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The eggs can come as late as 3-5 months after mating. A clutch is 5-20 relatively large eggs; a female of about 150 cm typically lays about 11. Shortly before laying the female lies on her side or turns her belly upwards. From now on she is kept at the day temperature around the clock.

Give the female a nest box she can lie coiled in, preferably one that can stand directly in the incubator. The female coils around the eggs and broods them, and she must be treated carefully if the eggs are moved.

Read more: Incubating eggs

INCUBATION

The eggs can stay with the female or be moved to an incubator. If they must be moved, two people are needed: one holds the female while the other loosens her coils without disturbing the clutch. The eggs are placed in the same orientation in the incubation medium and must not be turned. If the eggs are stuck together, they can be left together so the shells are not torn. Make small depressions in vermiculite or perlite so the eggs do not roll, and cover about two thirds of each egg. The medium must be damp but not wet.

The incubation temperature is 30-32 °C, preferably a constant 31 °C. The eggs hatch after 60-75 days. The humidity in the incubator is not documented. The young slit the shell and come out within a day.

REARING THE YOUNG

Newly hatched young can be kept like adults, only with slightly higher humidity and with water always available. Keep them singly in small, escape-proof boxes. When the young go into a shed, humidity is raised to 80-90 %. They begin to take pinkies after the first shed, and they can grow quickly: they can reach about 120 cm in the first year, but less is more common.

Health and common mistakes

Aspidites ramsayi is hardy, and most problems are caused by the wrong humidity or overfeeding. Typical problems are:

- Blisters and scale rot, if the air or substrate is too damp. Keep the enclosure dry, and correct it at once.
- Obesity, because the species accepts almost all the food it is given.
- The snake swallowing the feeding tongs along with the prey. Use long tongs, and hold on until the snake has hold.
- Poor sheds, which are most often caused by the wrong temperature or too low humidity.
- Burns from direct contact with a heat source.
- Wheezing breathing, mucus, an open mouth, a longer time without appetite outside the breeding period, lethargy and weight loss. This requires a vet with reptile experience.
- Serpentovirus (formerly called nidovirus), which is widespread among captive pythons. It causes respiratory disease with mucus and an open mouth, the infection does not go away again, and many infected animals die. Quarantine new animals, and have them tested by a vet before they come near other pythons.

Keep new animals separate from other reptiles during a quarantine period.

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.