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SNAKES

Brown House Snake

Boaedon capensis

Boaedon capensis is a slender, nocturnal constrictor from southern Africa, where it lives in scrub, grassland and around human dwellings and hunts rodents and lizards. In the enclosure it is hardy and simple to keep, and adults usually become calm in the hand, but the species is a skilled escape artist, and juveniles are fast.

Family: Lamprophiidae Former name: *Lamprophis capensis; Boaedon capense*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**60-120 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**10-20 years**
Active	**At night**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial**
Habitat	**Semi-desert and savanna**
Difficulty	**Beginner**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**90 × 45 × 40 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**24-28 °C**
Basking spot	**30-32 °C**
Temperature, night	**20-24 °C**
Humidity	**40-60%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Optional**
Diet	**Vertebrates**
Kept	**Singly**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Clutch size	**5-16 eggs**
Clutches per year	**1-4**
Incubation	**55-65 days** at 29-30 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

CITES	**Not listed**
EU annex	**Not listed**
IUCN	**Least Concern (LC)**

About the species

Boaedon capensis is a slender, smooth-scaled snake with an oval head, large eyes with vertical pupils and a colour that varies from sandy brown and dark brown through olive to almost black. The scales have an oily, iridescent sheen. A bold, dark stripe runs from the snout through the eye towards the neck, and many animals also have pale side stripes or chain-like markings on the sides, which usually fade towards the tail. Others have no markings at all on the body. Females reach 90-120 cm, a few up to 150 cm, and rarely weigh more than 300 g. Males reach 60-75 cm and rarely weigh more than 150 g. The male's tail is longer than the female's, and the difference can be seen even in newly hatched young.

The genus *Boaedon* was for a long time included in *Lamprophis*, and older literature still uses the name *Lamprophis capensis*. The populations from southern Africa, which were formerly regarded as *Boaedon fuliginosus* or *B. lineatus*, are today regarded as *B. capensis*, while *B. fuliginosus* in the narrow sense belongs to West Africa. The original type specimens have been lost, and in 2026 the species was given a new type specimen from the Western Cape, which fixes the name.

The confusion is widespread in the trade. Many animals sold as *B. fuliginosus* come from the southern populations and are today *B. capensis*, and the lines are often not documented. The two species are therefore kept separate in breeding, and animals of unknown origin are not bred with animals whose species and origin are known. Care is in practice the same for both. See the care guide for *Boaedon fuliginosus*.

The species is harmless to humans. Juveniles can be fast and nippy, and the teeth are long, so a bite can cause small, bleeding scratches. There are many bred colour and pattern variants, including albino, anery, calico and patternless animals, but the guide deals with the species in its natural form.

Distribution and habitat

Boaedon capensis lives in southern Africa: South Africa, Lesotho, Eswatini, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Zambia and Malawi. The type locality is at the Cape of Good Hope in the Western Cape, and the species is found over large parts of South Africa from KwaZulu-Natal to the Western Cape.

Older records from East Africa (Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania) are uncertain and are not shown on the map, which shows only the certain range in the south.

> **Native range:** South Africa, Lesotho, Eswatini, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Zambia and Malawi.

HABITAT

B. capensis is found in scrub, grassland, semi-desert scrub and forest edges and is common in gardens, villages and towns, where mice, rats and lizards gather. The snake is nocturnal and spends the day hidden under stones, logs and debris, in holes in the ground or in masonry. Around Springbok in the semi-arid Northern Cape there are striped animals that may be a local form.

The prey is opportunistic: rodents, geckos and other lizards, frogs, bats and small birds, which the snake kills by constriction. It can eat an entire nest of baby mice in one meal. The climate in the range is subtropical to temperate with warm summers and cool, dry winters, and the snake is most active in the warm season.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

An adult *B. capensis* needs an enclosure of at least 90 × 45 × 40 cm. Larger is always better, and large females do well in 100 × 50 × 40 cm. The species is active at night and uses the floor area, so length and width are more important than height. The care figures in the guide apply to the genus *Boaedon* and are the same as for *B. fuliginosus*.

The enclosure must be completely escape-proof. The snakes are slender and strong enough to squeeze through even small gaps and push against any weak point in lids and doors until it gives way. Lids and doors must close tightly and be lockable. Juveniles are particularly good at escaping.

The substrate is a layer of at least 5 cm of untreated wood fibre, aspen shavings or coconut fibre. The species likes to dig, and a deep substrate gives security. The snake eats a lot and leaves a corresponding amount of faeces, so faeces are removed continually, and the substrate is changed completely every three to four weeks. Newspaper or kitchen paper is a cheap alternative.

Furnish with two tight-fitting hides, one at the warm and one at the cool end, and a humid hide with sphagnum, which helps during shedding. Cork, bark and low branches provide variety and visual cover. The animals are kept singly because they have a keen feeding response, and because being housed together stresses them and carries a risk of one snake eating another.

TEMPERATURE

The enclosure must have a clear temperature gradient. During the day it is 24-28 °C, with about 24 °C at the cool end. The warmest spot, where the snake can lie and warm itself, should be 30-32 °C. At night 20-24 °C is suitable, and it is fine for the temperature to drop a little.

Heat comes best from a heat mat or heating cable at one end, or from a ceramic heater. All heat sources are controlled by a thermostat with the probe at the warmest spot. A thermostat is not optional, because unregulated heat sources cause temperature spikes that can harm the animal. Measure the temperature with two thermometers, one at each end, and check that the surface where the snake lies does not get warmer than 32 °C.

Breeding animals get a cooler period in winter: the basking spot is switched off, the night temperature is 18-20 °C, and the daytime temperature is 24-26 °C. Feeding is greatly reduced or stopped entirely for females in good condition. Animals that are not bred need no brumation.

Read more: Heat and temperature Read more: Brumation and the seasons

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Humidity should be 40-60%. In most rooms this is achieved with a water bowl, and it is rarely necessary to mist. Measure with a hygrometer in the middle of the enclosure, and ensure good ventilation so that the moisture does not cause mould and bacterial growth. If humidity is too high for a prolonged period, the risk of respiratory infection increases.

Fresh water must be available at all times in a heavy bowl that does not tip over and is large enough for the snake to lie in. The water is changed daily, and since the snake often passes faeces in the bowl, it is checked every day. Females readily lay eggs in the water bowl if there is no laying box.

During shedding a humid hide with sphagnum helps. If remnants of old skin hang on the snake, especially on the head and the tail tip, the humid hide must be available at all times. The skin must come off in one piece.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

B. capensis is nocturnal and does not need bright light. A fixed light rhythm of about 12 hours of light and 12 hours of dark all year round gives a clear daily rhythm. UVB is not necessary for animals that are fed whole prey. If you want UVB anyway, it should be weak, corresponding to Ferguson zone 1-2, and the snake must have hides in the shade and must never be forced to lie in the light. Glass and plastic block UVB, so a position by a window gives no UVB and can make the enclosure too warm.

Direct, strong lighting stresses the species. Ordinary room light or an LED lamp on a timer is enough. Breeding animals can have a shorter photoperiod in winter together with the cooler period.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

Boaedon capensis kills its prey by constriction, has a strong feeding response and usually eats readily. It is fed whole, thawed mice and, for large females, small rats, never live prey. The prey should be about as thick as the snake's widest point and never more than 1.5 times as thick. Thawed prey is warmed to body temperature and offered with long tongs.

- Newly hatched young get newborn mice and gradually move on to larger prey as they grow. Juveniles are fed every 5-7 days.
- Subadults are fed once a week.
- Adult females are fed every 7-14 days with small to medium-sized adult mice.
- Males are smaller and get smaller prey.

The species easily becomes overweight, and overweight animals breed poorly and develop related diseases. Keep a fixed rhythm, and let a fat animal come down to normal weight instead of offering more. The snake should have a rounded but not fat body shape with no visible spine. Prey that has not been taken after a few hours is removed.

Young from wild-caught parents may prefer lizards to mice. The scent of a gecko or lizard on the mouse can persuade a hesitant youngster. Males may take a break from food during the mating season. This is normal; simply continue offering food once a week.

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

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Juveniles and subadults can be fast, nippy and restless, and they can spring out of the enclosure like a released spring when the lid is opened. Open the lid carefully over a safe spot. Newly hatched young can release a foul-smelling secretion when handled. Most adults become calm and tolerate handling well, but temperament is individual, and some remain nervous.

The snake has a keen feeding response and long teeth. Wash your hands before handling so that they do not smell of mice, and avoid handling immediately after feeding and during shedding, when vision is reduced. After a week of settling into a new enclosure you can begin with short handling sessions. Calm, steady handling strengthens the habituation.

The species is kept singly. Males and females are kept apart, even when they are used for breeding, and they meet only for a short mating period. Nocturnal animals are rarely seen during the day, and this is normal as long as the snake eats, sheds in one piece and is in good condition.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

Females are considerably larger than males, and the male's tail is longer and thicker at the base, which can be seen even in newly hatched young. Sex can be determined by popping the hemipenes in newly hatched animals and with a probe in young and adult animals, as with other snakes. Both should be carried out by an experienced person.

The snakes become sexually mature quickly and at small sizes, but females should be bred only when fully grown and in good condition. The age at sexual maturity has not been documented.

MATING

The species can be bred all year round, but a cooler winter period gives control over egg laying and rest for the female (see temperature). The female must have at least six months a year without mating, because repeated clutches strain the body and shorten the breeding life.

The male and female are put together for a short mating period and separated again afterwards. Keep an eye on them during mating, because the species quickly grabs whatever it perceives as prey.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female lays eggs 6-8 weeks after mating, and about two weeks before laying she sheds. A clutch is 5-16 eggs of about 30 × 15 mm, and in captivity a female can lay up to four clutches a year. This shortens the breeding life, because she can produce only a limited number of eggs in her lifetime: with three or four clutches a year she lays fertile eggs for only about four years. In the wild the species lays in summer, and several clutches in a row are known only from captivity.

Give the female a laying box before laying: a plastic container with a hole in the lid and damp peat moss or sphagnum. Without it the species often lays in the water bowl.

INCUBATION

The eggs are moved carefully to an incubation box with damp vermiculite (equal parts water and vermiculite by weight) and small air holes in the lid. The eggs are placed in the same position as they lay, and are not turned, because the embryo can drown. The eggs hatch after about 60 days at 29-30 °C; at a lower temperature it takes longer, up to about 90 days.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

The young are 20-25 cm long at hatching and are kept singly in small boxes with hides, a water bowl and a slightly damp substrate. The first meal is a newborn mouse after the first shed. Juveniles can be fed every 5-7 days and grow quickly; adult size is reached in two to three years. Open the boxes carefully, because the young are fast and can jump out and injure themselves in a fall.

Health and common mistakes

Boaedon capensis is hardy, and most problems are caused by errors in husbandry:

- Obesity: feeding too often or too much leads to poor breeding ability and other related diseases.
- Stuck skin: humidity too low. Provide a humid hide, and check that the whole skin, including the eye caps and tail tip, has come off.
- Respiratory infection: wheezing breathing, bubbles at the nostrils, open mouth and reduced activity. Can be caused by too low a temperature, humidity that is too high or too low, or poor ventilation.
- Mites: small dark dots on the snake, in the water bowl or on your hands after handling. The snake may bathe often and have difficulty shedding. Sick animals are isolated, the enclosure is cleaned and disinfected, and the substrate is changed completely.
- Egg-laying problems: a female that does not lay, or that is clearly ill, must go to a vet.

New animals are quarantined for at least a month before they come near other snakes. Keep the enclosure clean, and change the substrate often. Go to a vet with experience in reptiles for loss of appetite outside the mating season, uneven shedding, swellings or breathing difficulties.

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.