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SNAKES

African Brown House Snake

Boaedon fuliginosus

Boaedon fuliginosus is a small, slender, nocturnal constrictor from the savannas of West Africa, where it often lives close to human houses and eats everything from lizards to rodents. Animals in trade are hardy and usually become calm as adults, but they have a very eager feeding response and are skilled escape artists.

Family: Lamprophiidae Former name: *Lamprophis fuliginosus*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**60-120 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**10-20 years**
Active	**At night**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial**
Habitat	**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 fuliginosus is a slender, smooth-scaled snake with an oval head, large eyes with vertical pupils and a body colour that varies from light brown through olive to almost black. Along each side of the head there is usually a light stripe from the snout towards the corner of the mouth. Some individuals have stripes, spots or a reddish or orange tinge. The colour can change during life, for example from black towards olive. Females reach 90-120 cm and rarely weigh more than 300 g. Males reach 60-75 cm and rarely weigh more than 150 g, and their tail is longer than the female's, which 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 fuliginosus*. Since 2010 the genus has been reinstated. At the same time the old, widely distributed *B. fuliginosus* has been split into several species: *B. fuliginosus* in the narrow sense is restricted to West Africa, while the populations in southern and south-eastern Africa are now assigned to *B. capensis*, and other populations belong to species such as *B. lineatus*, *B. olivaceus*, *B.*

angolensis and *B. perisilvestris*. Many animals in the hobby are still sold as *B. fuliginosus* but come from populations now regarded as *B. capensis*, and the lines are often undocumented. Husbandry is in practice the same for the whole group, and the figures here apply to *Boaedon* from savanna and cultivated land.

The species is harmless to humans. Young can be fast and bitey, and the teeth are long, so a bite can leave small, bleeding scratches. Adults usually become calm in the hand. There are many bred colour and pattern variants, but this guide deals with the species in its natural form.

Distribution and habitat

Boaedon fuliginosus in the narrow sense lives in the savanna regions of West Africa, from Mauritania and Senegal east through Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Mali, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Niger and Nigeria to Cameroon, Chad and the Central African Republic.

Older sources give a much larger range over large parts of Africa south of the Sahara and all the way to the Cape. These populations are now regarded as other species. The precise range of *B. fuliginosus* has not been definitively delimited, because not all populations have been studied. Animals from southern Africa belong to *B. capensis*.

> **Native range:** Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Mali, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Central African Republic.

HABITAT

B. fuliginosus occurs in savanna, scrub and forest edges, and it is common in and around villages and towns, where mice, rats and lizards gather. The snake is nocturnal and spends the day hidden under stones, logs, rubbish and in holes in the ground or in masonry.

The climate in the range is tropical with a rainy season and a dry season. The daytime temperature is 28-35 °C for much of the year, and the nights are cooler. Prey is opportunistic: lizards, frogs, bats, small mammals and occasionally small birds, which the snake constricts by coiling around them. Many wild animals bear scars from fights with large prey or attacks by predators.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

An adult *B. fuliginosus* needs an enclosure of at least 90 × 45 × 40 cm. Larger is always better, and large females thrive in 100 × 50 × 40 cm. The species is curious and active at night and uses the floor area, so length and width matter more than height.

The enclosure must be completely escape-proof. The snakes are slender and strong enough to squeeze through even small gaps, for example between sliding doors, and young are particularly good at it. Lids and doors must close tightly and be lockable.

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 species eats a lot and leaves correspondingly much faeces, so the substrate must be checked daily and replaced completely at regular intervals. Newspaper or kitchen paper is a cheap alternative.

Furnish with two close-fitting hides, one at the warm end and one at the cool end, and a humid hide with sphagnum, which helps with shedding. Branches, bark and cork give variety. The animals are kept singly, because they are so eager for food that they can eat each other.

TEMPERATURE

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

Heat is best provided by a heat mat or heat cable at one end or by a ceramic heater or a lamp. 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 temperature with two thermometers, one at each end, and check that the surface where the snake lies does not become warmer than 32 °C.

Breeding animals get a cooler period in winter: the hot spot is switched off, the night temperature is 18-20 °C and the day temperature 24-26 °C. Feeding is cut back sharply or stopped completely for females in good condition. Animals that are not bred need no winter rest.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Humidity should be 40-60 %. In most living rooms this is achieved with a water bowl, and misting is rarely necessary. Measure with a hygrometer in the middle of the enclosure, and ensure good ventilation, so the humidity does not cause mould and bacterial growth.

Fresh water must be available at all times in a heavy bowl that will not tip over. The water is changed daily. Females readily lay eggs in the water bowl if there is no laying box.

During a shed a humid hide with sphagnum helps. If remnants of old skin hang on the snake, the humid hide must be available all the time. The skin must come off in one piece, and the eyes must be clear afterwards.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

B. fuliginosus is nocturnal and does not need strong light. A fixed light rhythm of about 12 hours of light and 12 hours of darkness all year round gives a clear daily rhythm. UVB is not necessary for healthy animals fed whole prey, but a weak UVB light corresponding to Ferguson zone 1-2 can be used, as long as the snake has hides in the shade and is never forced to lie in the light. Glass and plastic block UVB, so a window sill 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.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

Boaedon fuliginosus constricts its prey, has a strong feeding response and almost always eats. It is fed whole, thawed mice or 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.

- Newly hatched young get pinkies and gradually move on to larger mouse pups as they grow. Young are fed every 5-7 days.
- Adult females are fed every 10-14 days with mice or small rats.
- Males are smaller and get smaller prey, for example adult mice.

The species easily becomes overweight, and overweight animals breed poorly and develop secondary diseases. Keep a fixed rhythm, and let a fat animal return 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.

Males may stop eating during the mating season. This is normal; simply continue offering food once a week. The prey is given with long tongs, so the snake does not mistake the hand for food.

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Young and subadults can be fast, bitey 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 place. Most adults become calm and tolerate handling well, but temperament is individual, and some remain nervous.

The snake has a very eager feeding response and long teeth. Wash your hands before handling, so they do not smell of mice, and avoid handling immediately after feeding. Calm, steady handling strengthens habituation.

The species is kept singly. Housing with conspecifics risks one snake eating another, and males and females are kept apart, even when used for breeding, so the female is not mated all the time. They meet only for a short mating period.

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 in other colubrids. Both should be carried out by an experienced person.

The species becomes 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 is not documented.

MATING

The species can be bred all year, 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. Watch them during mating, because the species is quick to seize what 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, 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 life: with three or four clutches a year she lays fertile eggs for only about four years.

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. Do not turn the eggs, because the embryo can drown. The eggs hatch after about 60 days at 29-30 °C.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

The young are 20-25 cm long at hatching and are kept singly in small boxes with a hide, a water bowl and a lightly damp substrate. The first meal is a pinkie after the first shed. They grow quickly and reach adult size in two to three years. Open the boxes carefully, because the young are fast and can spring out and be injured in a fall.

Health and common mistakes

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

- Obesity: too frequent or too large feeding causes poor breeding ability and other secondary diseases.
- Retained skin: humidity too low. Provide a humid hide, and check that all the skin, including eye caps and tail tip, has come off.
- Respiratory infection: wheezing breathing, mucus from nose and mouth and an open mouth. May be caused by too low a temperature, too high humidity or poor ventilation.
- Mouth rot: redness, mucus and pus in the mouth.
- Mites and ticks: look for small dark dots, especially at the eyes and lips.
- Egg-laying problems: a female that does not lay, or that is clearly ill, must go to a vet.

Keep the enclosure clean, and change the substrate often. Go to a vet with reptile experience for loss of appetite outside the mating season, uneven sheds, swellings or breathing difficulty.

Read more: Common diseases and signs of illness

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.