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SNAKES

Beauty rat snake

Elaphe taeniura

A large, slender and alert snake from South, South-East and East Asia that grows to 150-200 cm and is recognised by the black stripe behind each eye and the dark markings on a yellowish-brown to olive body. *Elaphe taeniura* is diurnal, likes to climb and needs a large, tall and escape-proof enclosure.

Family: Colubridae Former name: *Orthriophis taeniurus; Elaphe taeniurus*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**150-200 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**15-25 years**
Active	**By day**
Lifestyle	**Arboreal and terrestrial**
Habitat	**Rainforest and rocky terrain**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**180 × 60 × 90 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**24-28 °C**
Basking spot	**30-31 °C**
Temperature, night	**20-24 °C**
Humidity	**50-80%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Optional**
Diet	**Vertebrates**
Kept	**Singly**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Clutch size	**4-15 eggs**
Incubation	**55-65 days** at 28-29 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

CITES	**Not listed**
EU annex	**Annex D**
IUCN	**Vulnerable (VU)**

About the species

Elaphe taeniura is a large, non-venomous snake with a slender body and a distinct head. The ground colour is yellowish brown to olive and darkens towards the tip of the tail. From each eye a black stripe runs backwards towards the corner of the mouth, and the back has pairs of round, black spots that merge. The name *taeniura* is compounded from Latin *taenia*, "band", and Greek *oura*, "tail", and refers to the banded markings often seen on the tail.

Adults typically reach 150-200 cm including the tail, and a few exceed 250 cm. Newly hatched young measure 30-45 cm and grow quickly: with plenty of food they reach 90 cm or more during the first year.

The species is very variable. Nine subspecies have been described from different parts of the range, and they differ in colour and markings, for example with a black stripe edged with blue behind the eye and a pale central stripe on the rear body in *Elaphe taeniura ridleyi*. The division into subspecies is disputed. For a period the species was classed as *Orthriophis taeniurus*, and that name is still widely used in the trade. Besides wild-type animals, albinos are available in the trade.

Captive-bred animals are far preferable. Wild-caught animals are often defensive, heavily infested with parasites, dehydrated and emaciated, and many are difficult to get feeding.

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

Distribution and habitat

Elaphe taeniura has a large range in South, South-East and East Asia. It is found in most of China (though not in the north-eastern and western parts), on Taiwan and Hainan and on the Ryukyu Islands in Japan, and to the south through Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar to Malaysia, Sumatra and Borneo. In north-eastern India it is found in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, the Darjeeling area and Mizoram.

The subspecies each have their own area: *Elaphe taeniura friesei* lives only on Taiwan, *Elaphe taeniura schmackeri* on the Ryukyu Islands, *Elaphe taeniura grabowskyi* on Sumatra and Borneo, *Elaphe taeniura ridleyi* on the Malay Peninsula and in southern Thailand, and *Elaphe taeniura callicyanous* in Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand. The map shows only the original range.

> **Native range:** China, Taiwan, India, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and Japan.

HABITAT

Elaphe taeniura is a habitat generalist found in forest, on farmland, on rocky slopes and along watercourses. It lives both on the ground and in trees and climbs on cliff faces and in caves. For *Elaphe taeniura ridleyi*, caves are a regular part of the habitat, and here the snake hunts bats. On Taiwan the species lives up to about 1,000 m above sea level.

The species takes shelter in piles of rubbish, vegetation and stones and can be seen near human settlement. It is diurnal, but in caves it can be active at all hours. Its food is rodents, bats, birds and bird eggs. The climate across most of the range is warm and humid with a rainy season.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

The care of *Elaphe taeniura* is based mainly on *Elaphe taeniura friesei* from Taiwan, which is the subspecies most often kept. It probably applies to the other subspecies as well.

An adult *E. taeniura* needs an enclosure of at least 180 × 60 × 90 cm (length × width × height). Height is just as important as length, because the species climbs and rests on shelves and branches, and 180 × 90 × 180 cm is better still. The species is kept singly; male and female are put together only for mating.

Furnish with branches, cork bark, broad leaves and dense hides, so that the snake can climb and retreat. There must be at least two hides, one in the warm and one in the cool end, and a humid hide with damp sphagnum for shedding. Suitable substrates are coconut fibre, cypress mulch or a mixture of bark and sphagnum, which holds moisture. Pine and cedar shavings are not suitable.

The species is a skilled escape artist. The enclosure must have a lid that can be locked and front doors that close tightly. Good ventilation is necessary, for example through mesh or ventilation grilles.

TEMPERATURE

There must be a clear temperature gradient, so that the snake can choose for itself. During the day the cool end should be about 24 °C and the warm end 26-28 °C, with a basking spot of 30-31 °C under the heat source for some hours a day. At night the temperature falls to 20-24 °C. Brumation is not necessary, but is used in breeding (see Breeding).

Use a ceramic heat emitter or a halogen spotlight as the heat source and, if wanted, a heat mat under the substrate, always controlled by a thermostat. Measure the temperature with digital thermometers with a probe at both ends, and check the basking spot with an IR thermometer. Keep the heat source out of the snake's reach, so that it cannot burn itself. If the snake spends most of its time in the cool end, or seems restless, the warm end should be lowered slightly.

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

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Humidity should be 50-80 %, and it should not fall below 50 %. During a shed it should be higher, about 80 %. A humid hide with damp sphagnum, misted daily, is essential for a clean shed. There must be no standing water at the bottom of the hide.

A large, stable water bowl with fresh water must always be available. The bowl should be large enough for the snake to lie in with most of its body, and the species likes to bathe. Fill it halfway so that the water does not slosh over, and change the water daily. The bowl can stand in the warm end if ventilation is good.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

Elaphe taeniura is diurnal and needs a clear day and night. The light is on for 12 hours a day, controlled by a timer. Night lighting is not used.

Special lighting is not necessary, but UVB can be offered to a diurnal species. If UVB is used, a low-output T5 tube over the warm end is enough, and the snake must be able to retreat into shade and hides. No Ferguson zone has been set for the species. Glass and plastic in front of the tube block UVB.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

Elaphe taeniura eats whole, frozen and thawed rodents. Young get newborn or small mice, subadults larger mice and small rats, and adults small to medium-sized rats. Chicks and eggs can add variety. Live prey is not recommended.

Prey should be no wider than the snake's widest point, and the species prefers several small prey items to one large one. Feeding intervals:

- Newly hatched young: every 4-5 days.
- Subadults: every 4-7 days.
- Adults: every 7-10 days.

Thaw the prey slowly, and warm it to slightly above room temperature in a sealed bag in warm water just before feeding. Use tweezers or tongs, so that the snake does not associate the hand with food. The species easily becomes too fat, so weigh the snake regularly and cut back if the body becomes round. Leave the snake in peace for 24-48 hours after feeding.

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Elaphe taeniura is alert, quick and shy. Captive-bred animals that are handled regularly from a young age usually become as calm to handle as *Pantherophis guttatus*. If they are not used to it, they become nervous. Wild-caught animals are often defensive and may bite.

A captive-bred animal needs up to a week to settle in, a wild-caught one two to four weeks. Wait to handle until the animal is eating regularly. Support the body with both hands, approach from the side, and never grab the tail. Signs of stress are rapid breathing and fleeing behaviour. If the snake becomes more stressed, it raises the front of its body in an S-shape, flattens its body and vibrates its tail. It then needs to be left in peace.

The species must not be kept with other snakes, and two animals of the species are put together only for mating.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

The sexes cannot be told apart from the outside in young. Sexing is done with a probe and must be carried out by an experienced person or a vet. The age at sexual maturity is not documented; young animals can probably breed in their second year. The female must be fully grown and in good condition before she is bred.

MATING

Brumation is necessary or at least beneficial to get the animals to mate, and it matters more for wild-caught animals than for animals bred over several generations. The snakes are kept in the dark at 11-17 °C for about 90 days and are not fed during that period. They are then warmed up again and fed well.

Mating follows about a month after brumation. Several males must not be put together.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The clutch is 4-15 eggs, occasionally more. The female needs a nest box with damp sphagnum or vermiculite and an opening so that she can crawl in. Egg-laying drains the female, and she needs plenty of food afterwards. The eggs are moved to an incubator.

Read more: Incubating eggs

INCUBATION

The eggs are placed in a box with damp vermiculite or perlite without being turned and incubated at 28-29 °C with high humidity. At that temperature they hatch after 55-65 days.

REARING THE YOUNG

Newly hatched young measure 30-45 cm. Keep them singly in secure enclosures with dense hides, a humid hide and a water bowl. Offer newborn or small mice every 4-5 days. The young grow quickly and can reach 90 cm or more during the first year. Handle them regularly so that they become calm as adults.

Health and common mistakes

Elaphe taeniura is hardy, but most problems are caused by incorrect heat, humidity or feeding. The typical mistakes are:

- Dehydration, especially in wild-caught animals. Always provide clean water, and change it daily.
- Overweight from feeding too often. Weigh the snake regularly.
- Poor sheds when the air is too dry. Provide a humid hide and something to rub against.
- Mites and ticks. Keep everything very clean, remove ticks with tweezers, and treat mites at the first sign.
- Internal parasites. Take a faecal sample to a vet.
- Respiratory infections with wheezing breathing, mucus and an open mouth. They are often caused by too low a temperature or poor hygiene.
- Scale rot and blisters, which indicate poor hygiene or a substrate that is too damp.

Contact a vet with reptile experience if the snake will not eat for several weeks, loses weight or has breathing problems.

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.