herpy

SNAKES

Kenyan sand boa

Eryx colubrinus

Eryx colubrinus is a small, heavily built boa from the arid regions of East Africa that spends most of its time buried in sand with only its upward-facing eyes above the surface. It is calm, does not need much space and can live to 20-30 years, so it is a good choice for anyone wanting a first snake.

Family: Boidae English name: Kenyan Sand Boa Former name: *Gongylophis colubrinus; Eryx thebaicus*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**40-65 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**20-30 years**
Active	**At dusk and at night**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial and burrowing**
Habitat	**Desert and semi-desert**
Difficulty	**Beginner**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**60 × 30 × 30 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**26-28 °C**
Basking spot	**33-35 °C**
Temperature, night	**22-25 °C**
Humidity	**20-40%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Recommended** Ferguson zone 2
Diet	**Vertebrates**
Kept	**Singly**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Live-bearing**
Litter size	**10-20 young**
Clutches per year	**1**
Gestation	**120-180 days**

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Eryx colubrinus is a small, thick, almost worm-shaped boa with smooth, glossy scales, a small head and an enlarged rostral scale that works like a shovel blade when the snake digs. The eyes are small, set high on the head and point obliquely upward, and the pupil is vertical. The tail is short and blunt and covered in larger, rougher scales than the rest of the body. The ground colour is grey, yellow or orange with darker blotches, and the belly is white, cream or faintly pink.

The species is one of the smallest boas in the hobby. Females reach 55-65 cm and in rare cases about 90 cm. Males are smaller and slimmer and seldom exceed 50 cm. Newborns are 20-25 cm. Both sexes are heavily built for their length.

The species has been listed under several genus names, especially *Gongylophis colubrinus*, and in older literature also as *Eryx thebaicus*. The East African form has been described as the subspecies *E. c. loveridgei*, but it is often not recognised, because the distinguishing features grade into one another. The question is not entirely settled. Many colour morphs are found in the trade, for example albino, anerythristic, snow, paradox and striped. Care is the same for all of them.

It is a calm and robust snake that seldom bites and normally tolerates handling well. It is an ambush predator, and it strikes quickly at anything that moves over its hidden spot in the sand. It is therefore important to pick it up correctly (see Behaviour).

Distribution and habitat

Eryx colubrinus lives in north-eastern and eastern Africa. Its range runs from Egypt and Sudan through South Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea to Somalia, Kenya and north-eastern Tanzania. There are unconfirmed reports from Chad, Niger and Yemen. In Tanzania it occurs near Kahe and near Ruaha, among other places. The species was described from Egypt, while the form *E. c. loveridgei* was described from Mbunyuni in Kenya. It does not occur in Libya.

The animals in the trade are overwhelmingly captive-bred.

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

> **Native range:** Egypt, Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Tanzania and Somalia.

HABITAT

Eryx colubrinus lives in arid and semi-arid areas with sandy or loose soil, scattered scrub vegetation and dry riverbeds. It is terrestrial and burrowing and spends most of the day buried or in burrows and rodent holes, from which it lies in wait for prey. It is most active at night and at dusk, but can be irregularly active by day, when it comes out to bask or hunt. It rarely climbs.

The climate is hot and dry. Its prey is small mammals, lizards and birds, which the snake ambushes from its hiding place. When the temperature is high, it retreats into the sand, where it is cooler and more humid.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

An adult *Eryx colubrinus* needs an enclosure of at least 60 × 30 × 30 cm (length × width × height), preferably 90 × 45 × 45 cm. Females that are larger than average need more than the minimum. The species needs less space than most snakes because it rests most of the time, but there must be room for a clear temperature gradient.

The substrate is the most important thing: sand or sandy soil in a layer of at least 8-10 cm, so that the snake can burrow. A mix of about 60 % topsoil without additives and 40 % play sand works, and so does pure terrarium sand. The species can also be kept and bred on aspen shavings, coconut fibre and newspaper, but it burrows mostly in sand. Avoid gravel, corn cob and cedar. Heavy stones must not lie loose, because the snake digs under them and they can fall and injure it. Hides and stones must therefore be fixed in place or rest on the floor of the enclosure.

Provide two hides, one at the warm end and one at the cool end, so small that the snake fits snugly in them. Make them of cork, ceramic or plastic. Decor should be simple and solid, because the species digs everything over. Branches are not necessary, because it seldom climbs.

The lid must fit completely tight and be locked. Even a small *E. colubrinus* can push off a light lid. Remove faeces and urates daily, and replace the substrate completely every three to four months.

Read more: Heat and temperature

TEMPERATURE

Eryx colubrinus tolerates dry, hot conditions. There must be a warm end and a cool end. The surface under the heat source should be 33-35 °C, and the cool end 26-28 °C. At night the temperature may fall to 22-25 °C. The heat is best provided by one or two spot bulbs or halogen bulbs above the enclosure, possibly supplemented by a heat mat under one end, always controlled by a thermostat. Place a flat stone on top of a hide under the heat source, so that the snake can lie both in the warmth and beneath it.

Measure the surface temperature with an infrared thermometer and the air temperature at both ends with a digital thermometer. If it is too hot, the heat source needs a lower wattage; if it is too cool, it needs a higher one. Switch the bulbs off at night.

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Eryx colubrinus lives in a dry climate, and the enclosure should be dry most of the time. Humidity is best around 20-40 %; the figure is an estimate based on the habitat. A hygrometer shows whether the enclosure is becoming too humid.

Place a heavy, stable ceramic water bowl at the cool end. A light plastic bowl tips over and dampens the sand. Change the water daily and scrub the bowl once a week. During shedding the air should be more humid: mist the substrate lightly, or place a hide with lightly moist sphagnum or coconut fibre at the cool end. After the shed, let the substrate dry out again. If the substrate is constantly damp, fungus and skin problems can develop.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

Eryx colubrinus is most active at dusk and at night and can live without UVB, but a weak UVB tube is recommended, because it supports the daily rhythm and covers the need for vitamin D3. Use a low-output T5 tube for shade dwellers or a 5-6 % T5 HO tube, about half as long as the enclosure, above the warm end, and aim for a UV index of 2-3 at the basking spot. With a 5-6 % T5 HO tube above a mesh, the distance to the snake is about 25-30 cm, without a mesh about 35-40 cm; ideally measure with a UV meter. The snake must always be able to retreat into the sand or into a hide.

The light is on 12 hours a day all year round, controlled by a timer.

Read more: Lighting and UVB Read more: Calcium, vitamins and supplements

FEEDING

Eryx colubrinus is a carnivore and takes whole prey. The staple food is mice: adult females can take a large adult mouse, adult males a large hopper mouse. Juveniles start on pinkie mice and often prefer live prey at first, but almost all switch to thawed prey as they grow. Preferably give frozen and thawed prey, not live, since prey can bite and injure the snake. Thaw the prey in a bag in warm water to about 32 °C and offer it with long soft-tipped tongs, so that the snake does not grab your fingers.

Feed juveniles every 1-2 weeks and adults every 2-4 weeks. Breeding females may need to eat more often, up to once a week, while males usually eat less than females. The prey should be about as wide as the snake at its widest point; give one or two prey items per feeding. Weigh the snake regularly, and adjust so that it holds its weight. Variety keeps the snake healthy and less fussy: small rats, young hamsters and gerbils, quail chicks, chicks and lizards can alternate with mice.

Snakes in shed often take the prey and let it go again, so skip the feeding when the eyes are bluish. Males may fast for several months during the breeding season; this is normal. Supplements are not strictly necessary, but a light dusting of the prey with calcium and multivitamin now and then prevents deficiencies. If the snake does not take the prey from the tongs, place it on a small plate so that no sand is swallowed with it.

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Eryx colubrinus is calm and seldom bites. Let new animals settle in for two weeks and begin handling only when they are eating regularly. Keep the first sessions to no more than 5 minutes, let the snake crawl up into your hand, and support the body as much as possible. Lift it from the middle of the body, never from above at the front third, because it may take the hand for prey and strike. Touch it lightly with a paper roll before you pick it up, so that it knows it is not feeding time.

A bite causes only small scratches, but it is unpleasant for both you and the snake. Wash your hands after handling.

The species is not social and does best alone. Males must never be kept together, because they can fight. A male and a female or two females can be kept together, but must be fed separately. The species digs and often disappears into the substrate, so a snake you cannot see is seldom a snake that has escaped.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

Males are smaller than females and slimmer. Sex is most reliably determined by probing, which should only be done by an experienced keeper or a vet. Females must be fully grown and in good condition before they are used for breeding. Precise limits for age and size at sexual maturity are not documented.

MATING

In captivity mating typically occurs from November to April. Put the male in with the female in her enclosure, and leave them together for a few days, or until mating has been seen. The male often fasts during the breeding season. Give the female plenty of food before and after mating, so that she has reserves for the pregnancy.

The male is removed again once the female is gravid, and should not be in the enclosure at birth.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

Eryx colubrinus gives birth to live young and does not lay eggs. Gestation probably lasts 4-6 months; the figure is an estimate based on the mating and birth periods. The young are born from spring to late summer, on average 10-20 in a litter.

The gravid female needs peace, constant access to heat and water, and should be offered food regularly. Many females eat less in the last weeks. After the birth she needs peace and is offered food again after a week or two.

INCUBATION

There is no incubation, because the young are born live and are independent from the first day. The gravid female needs the same gradient as usual, with a warm zone of 33-35 °C, so that she can regulate her temperature and the embryos develop evenly. If she is too cold for a longer period, it can result in weak or stillborn young.

Birth takes place in the enclosure, and the female often burrows down as it approaches. Remove dead young and foetal membranes as soon as you notice them, and keep the enclosure quiet until the birth is over.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

The young are 20-25 cm at birth. Take them from the female shortly after birth, and keep them singly in small boxes with a warm and a cool zone, 2-3 cm of sand or kitchen roll as substrate, a small hide and a shallow water bowl. The boxes must be completely secure and have ventilated lids, because the young are very small. Their first shed comes after one to two weeks, and they normally do not eat until after it.

Start with pinkie mice. Many young take only live pinkies at first, but most switch to thawed prey as they get bigger. Thawed pinkies are offered with tongs. Feed every 1-2 weeks, and increase the prey size as they grow. Keep the young separate, so that they do not bite each other and so that you can see what each one eats.

Health and common mistakes

Eryx colubrinus is robust, and most problems are caused by husbandry errors. The typical errors are:

- A persistently damp substrate, which causes skin infections and blisters on the belly. They are avoided when the substrate is kept dry and dampened only during shedding.
- Too low a temperature, which causes poor digestion and regurgitation. Always measure the surface with an infrared thermometer.
- Retained shed, especially on the tip of the tail and around the eyes, after shedding in too dry an enclosure. Provide a damp hide during the next shed, and loosen remains with lukewarm water.
- Injuries from heavy stones that have fallen while the snake was digging. Fix in place everything that is heavy.
- Obesity in animals that are fed too often. Adult animals outside breeding need only one prey item every 2-4 weeks.
- Mites, which show up as small dots on and around the snake and in the hides. They must be treated, and the enclosure must be cleaned thoroughly.

A healthy animal has clear eyes, a firm body and eats willingly. Seek a vet experienced in reptiles if the snake loses weight, refuses to eat beyond its normal fasting, has an open mouth or wheezy breathing, or if the birth drags on.

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.