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SNAKES

Javelin Sand Boa

Eryx jaculus

Eryx jaculus is a small, heavy-bodied sand boa and one of the few boas that live wild in Europe. It burrows into loose soil in dry, open landscapes from the Balkans and the Mediterranean islands to North Africa and the Middle East, and does well in a simple, dry enclosure with a deep burrowing layer.

Family: Boidae Former name: *Eryx turcicus; Boa turcica*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**40-80 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**15-25 years**
Active	**At dusk and at night**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial and burrowing**
Habitat	**Semi-desert**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**75 × 40 × 30 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**22-28 °C**
Basking spot	**30-32 °C**
Temperature, night	**20-24 °C**
Humidity	**30-50%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Optional**
Winter rest	**14-18 °C** 8-12 weeks
Diet	**Vertebrates**
Kept	**Singly**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Live-bearing**
Litter size	**4-15 young**
Gestation	**120 days**

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Eryx jaculus is a thick, fairly uniformly built boa with a small head and no distinct neck, small eyes that point obliquely upwards and have a vertical pupil, and a large, broad rostral scale that it uses for digging. The tail is short and blunt. The ground colour is greyish, yellowish-brown, brownish or reddish, with darker blotches or crossbars forming an irregular network, and most have a dark streak from the eye to the corner of the mouth. The belly is whitish or yellowish.

E. jaculus grows to 80 cm. As in most sand boas, the females are larger and have shorter tails than the males. Lifespan has not been documented; the 15-25 years in the specifications is an estimate based on related sand boas.

Older literature divides the species into several subspecies, but they cannot be told apart, and recent studies treat *E. jaculus* as one species without subspecies. Without knowing the locality, it can be hard to tell from *Eryx miliaris*.

The Latin species name means javelin and refers to the snake's ability to seize or bite quickly. In practice it is defensive: when threatened it lies still, coils up with the head hidden, empties its bowels or retreats. It may also flatten and broaden its body and snap without biting. A real bite is very rare.

Distribution and habitat

Eryx jaculus has one of the largest ranges among the sand boas. In North Africa it occurs from Morocco to Egypt, in the Middle East in Israel, Palestine, Syria, Jordan and northern Saudi Arabia, and eastwards through Turkey and the Caucasus, including southern Russia, to Iraq and Iran. In Europe it occurs in the Balkans, in Greece (including many islands), Albania, Macedonia and Bulgaria, in Sicily and in Romania, where only a few lowland localities along the Danube are known and where the species was rediscovered in 2014 after a long time without records.

> **Native range:** Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Israel, Palestinian Territories, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, North Macedonia, Italy, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia.

HABITAT

Eryx jaculus lives in dry, open landscapes with loose soil in which it can bury itself. Like other sand boas of the genus *Eryx*, it often lives in tunnels and burrows made by other animals rather than in pure sand, and it lies hidden most of the time. Its prey is mainly lizards and small mammals, which it ambushes from cover.

There are no documented figures for its activity period. In the northern part of the range the winters are cool, so the animals are probably not active all year.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

Little documented information exists on the care of *Eryx jaculus*. The recommendations are based on the care of other sand boas of the genus, especially *Eryx miliaris*, which is the closest and best-known species, and the figures are borrowed from it.

An adult *E. jaculus* needs an enclosure of at least 75 × 40 × 30 cm (length × width × height). The species uses almost no height, so floor area is what counts. Young animals do well in small, tight plastic boxes with many small ventilation holes.

The name sand boa is misleading, and pure sand is not the best substrate, because the animals can swallow it while feeding, and it is heavy and awkward to keep clean. Use instead a 10 cm layer of aspen shavings, optionally mixed with untreated topsoil and a little sand. The deeper the layer, the more secure the snake feels. Avoid cedar and pine. Paper and kitchen roll with a hide can be used for young animals and in quarantine.

Place a small, snug hide at each end so the snake does not have to choose between the right temperature and security. Also put a heavy, tip-proof water bowl at the cool end. The lid must fit tightly, because sand boas slip through small gaps.

Read more: Quarantine and hygiene

TEMPERATURE

The heat comes from below. Put a heat tape or heat mat under no more than a quarter of the floor at one end, controlled by a thermostat, so that the substrate at the warm end is 30-32 °C. A gravid female needs 32-35 °C. The air in the enclosure is 22-28 °C by day, coolest at the cool end, and 20-24 °C at night. Measure the substrate temperature with an infrared thermometer, because the snake takes its warmth from the substrate and not from the air. Heat lamps are not necessary, as the species does not bask.

In the northern parts of the range the winters are cool, and species from temperate regions breed best after a cool period. It is therefore worth offering a winter rest of 8-12 weeks at 14-18 °C, and letting the snake fast for the last two weeks before cooling. The figures for the winter rest are estimates, not documented.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Eryx jaculus lives in a dry climate, and the enclosure should be dry. Humidity is best at 30-50 %; the figure is an estimate based on the habitat. Change the water in the bowl regularly. Before a shed, a hide with lightly moist sphagnum or coconut fibre is useful at the cool end. Remove it again afterwards. A constantly damp substrate causes skin problems.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

UVB is not documented as necessary for *E. jaculus*, and the species spends most of its time hidden. A weak UVB tube can be offered as an option, provided there is plenty of cover as well. The light is on for 12 hours a day, controlled by a timer.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

Eryx jaculus takes whole prey. The staple is small mice, preferably newborn or half-grown, because sand boas prefer prey that is not much thicker than themselves. Prefer thawed prey to live prey. If the snake will not take thawed prey, a freshly killed prey item warmed in a bag in hot water, or one moved with tongs, can help. Offer food in the evening, because sand boas prefer to eat at dusk and after dark, and remove uneaten prey in the morning.

Young animals are fed every 7-10 days and adults every 2-3 weeks; the figures are borrowed from related sand boas. Newborns are very small and probably eat lizards in the wild. If they will not take pinkies, a pinkie rubbed against a lizard, or a thawed pinkie with a little brain tissue smeared on the snout, can get them started. Males often stop eating during the breeding season. Skip feeding when the eyes are bluish.

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Eryx jaculus is a secretive, calm snake that spends most of its time buried. It very rarely bites and uses the defensive postures described under the description instead. Keep it singly: the larger female may eat all the food if two animals share an enclosure, and the animals meet only in the breeding season.

Newly acquired animals should be checked for parasites by a vet with reptile experience and kept in quarantine before they are placed near other snakes. Handle the snake rarely and calmly, and support its body.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

Females are larger than males and have shorter tails. Sand boas normally reach breeding size after 3-4 years, and the snakes should be about two thirds to three quarters of adult size. In females weight matters more than length. Exact figures for age, length and weight in *Eryx jaculus* are not documented.

MATING

Sand boas from temperate regions do not breed without a cool period, so a cool winter rest (see Temperature) is the first step. After the winter rest both animals are fed up, and the male is put in with the female a few days a week for a few weeks. The male often does not eat during the breeding season. Mating is rarely observed. The timing of mating in captivity is not documented for the species.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

Eryx jaculus gives birth to live young. Gestation in sand boas lasts about four months; the figure is borrowed from related species. Litter size is not documented for the species; the box shows figures borrowed from *Eryx miliaris*. The gravid female often lies in the warmest part of the enclosure. Keep the substrate at the warm end at 32-35 °C, offer only small prey, and leave her in peace. She may refuse food in the last weeks.

INCUBATION

There is no incubation, because the young are born alive in thin membranes. Birth takes place at night. Put a small container of moist sphagnum in the enclosure as the birth approaches, since it helps the young out of the membranes. Keep the gravid female on a coarse substrate without fine sand, because sand sticks to the membranes and can get into the eyes and mouths of the young.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

Move the young to a clean, small box with moist kitchen paper and a hide, and keep them singly. The young are small and often take food only after their first shed. Start with pinkies, and see Food if they will not eat. Feed every 7-10 days.

Health and common mistakes

Eryx jaculus is rarely described in captivity, so there is no species-specific health knowledge. The problems are the same as in other sand boas:

- Sand in the gut when the animal swallows substrate during feeding. Use aspen shavings, and feed on a smooth surface, such as a piece of kitchen roll or a flat dish.
- Skin and respiratory problems in a persistently damp substrate.
- Intestinal parasites, especially in wild-caught animals.
- Mites, which show as small dots on and around the snake. They must be treated, and the enclosure cleaned thoroughly.
- Obesity in animals fed too often.

Seek a vet with reptile experience if the snake loses weight, refuses food beyond its normal fasting, breathes with an open mouth or with a wheeze, or if the birth drags on.

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

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.