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SNAKES

D'Albertis's Python

Leiopython albertisii

Leiopython albertisii is a medium-sized python from the lowland forests of New Guinea, with a glossy black head, white lip scales and a smooth, iridescent body that shifts between brown-violet and blue-black in the light. It is nocturnal, fast and often defensive. The species needs stable warmth, high humidity and an experienced keeper, but is robust when the conditions are right.

Family: Pythonidae Former name: *Liasis albertisii; Bothrochilus albertisii*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**180-210 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**20-30 years**
Active	**At night**
Lifestyle	**Arboreal and terrestrial**
Habitat	**Rainforest and wetland**
Difficulty	**Experienced**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**180 × 60 × 60 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**25-30 °C**
Basking spot	**32-35 °C**
Temperature, night	**22-25 °C**
Humidity	**70-80%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Optional**
Diet	**Vertebrates**
Kept	**Singly**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Sexually mature	**36-48 months**
Clutch size	**10-14 eggs**
Incubation	**55-65 days** at 30-32 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Leiopython albertisii is a medium-sized python with smooth, high-gloss scales and a distinctly set-off head. The body is without pattern. The body is brown-violet with a yellowish belly or blue-black with a grey belly, and the scales change colour in the light, so they shine blue, violet and green. The head is glossy black, and the scales of both the upper and lower lip are white with a black edge at the front. Small pale spots behind the eye are the only pale marking on the head. The species has heat-sensitive pits in both the upper and lower lip, which it uses to find warm-blooded prey in the dark.

Adults typically reach 180-210 cm in length, and a few reach about 240 cm. There is no clear difference in size between the sexes. The young are about 40 cm long at hatching and reach sexual maturity after three to four years. They live 20-30 years in captivity and may live longer.

The taxonomy has been in flux. In 2008 several new species were described from animals that had until then been counted as *L. albertisii*, including *Leiopython biakensis* from Biak and *Leiopython huonensis* from the Huon Peninsula, but they are today again regarded as part of *L. albertisii*. The southern *Leiopython hoserae*, by contrast, is a separate species. *L. albertisii* is the

northern species and is distinguished from it by the scales on the head, the pale spots behind the eye, a paler back colour and yellowish flanks. A few authors place the genus under the name *Bothrochilus*. In the trade, animals are often sold without precise identification, so an animal may be one of the other *Leiopython* species.

Animals in the trade are mostly captive-bred, but wild-caught animals still turn up. Captive-bred animals are healthier, used to thawed prey and less defensive. There are almost no colour variants, so animals in the trade almost all have the species' natural colours.

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

Distribution and habitat

Leiopython albertisii lives on New Guinea, both in the Indonesian part and in Papua New Guinea, and on several surrounding islands: Salawati, Biak, the Bismarck Islands, Normanby Island and the northern islands of the Torres Strait, which belong to Australia. The records from Normanby are uncertain.

The type locality is Kapaur on the Onin Peninsula and Andai near Doreri in western New Guinea. In Papua New Guinea the species is known from, among others, Milne Bay Province and Northern Province.

> **Native range:** Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Australia.

HABITAT

L. albertisii is found across most of New Guinea below about 1,200 m and is a species of lowland rainforest, forest edge and forest along watercourses. The snake stays mostly on the forest floor, but also climbs into lower vegetation and can be seen high up in trees. It is tied to damp areas close to rivers and streams.

The snake hunts at night. It feeds on small and medium-sized birds and mammals, while juveniles take mainly lizards. After a meal of mammals it regularly regurgitates lumps of undigested fur, also in captivity. This is normal and not the same as vomiting.

The climate is warm and humid all year with rain in every season. Temperature varies only a little, and there is no cool or dry period. This means that *L. albertisii* should not have a winter rest, and that humidity must be kept high all year round.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

An adult needs a terrarium of at least 180 × 60 × 60 cm (length × width × height). The species is active at night and uses the whole floor area, and cramped conditions cause stress and defensive behaviour. The height should not be under 60 cm, because the animal also climbs. Juveniles can begin in a smaller terrarium where they can stretch out fully, and are typically moved to the adult terrarium within two years.

The terrarium must be tight enough to hold the humidity. PVC, melamine or sealed wood with front doors holds heat and humidity better than glass. Glass can be used if it is insulated and partly covered. The lid must be secured, because the snake is strong and seeks to get out.

Use 5-8 cm of coconut fibre, soil without fertiliser or cypress mulch as substrate, preferably with a layer of moss or leaves on top. The substrate must hold moisture, but the top must be able to dry between mistings, otherwise scale rot develops. Clean at once after droppings, and replace the substrate completely every three to four weeks. Furnish with at least two hides, one at the warm end and one at the cool end, preferably narrow, so the snake can lie tight against the walls. A third hide with moist sphagnum helps during shedding. Add sturdy branches, cork bark and robust artificial or live plants, which give visual cover and climbing opportunities.

The animals must live alone. The terrarium must stand in a quiet place without much traffic, because the species is alert to movement and vibration.

TEMPERATURE

There must be a distinct gradient. By day the temperature in the terrarium is 25-30 °C, from 25-27 °C at the cool end to 29-31 °C at the warm end, and under the heat source the surface should be 32-35 °C. At night the temperature may fall to 22-25 °C, but no lower.

Heat is best supplied from above: halogen bulbs, ceramic heaters or radiant heat panels, all controlled by a thermostat. A heat mat can supplement, but only raises the temperature of the floor and not of the air. Never use hot rocks. Measure with digital probes at the heat source and at the cool end. Keep bulbs and elements behind a guard, so the snake cannot burn itself.

If it is too cold or too hot, it shows as loss of appetite, respiratory problems or lethargy. The species comes from a tropical climate and needs warmth and humidity all year without a cool season.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Humidity should be 70-80% and preferably slightly higher during shedding. The species has thin skin and dries out quickly when the air is too dry. Coconut fibre, soil or moss in the substrate is the best way to hold the humidity, and the lid should be partly covered.

Mist the terrarium daily, or use a misting system. Let the substrate dry out a little between mistings, so scale rot or mould does not develop. Measure with a hygrometer in the middle of the terrarium.

Provide a large, heavy water bowl so the snake can lie completely in it. The species bathes often, especially before shedding, and the bowl also contributes to the humidity, especially if it stands by the heat source. Change the water daily, and change it at once if the animal has passed droppings in it. If the animal bathes constantly outside shedding, it may indicate mites, too high a temperature or skin irritation.

LIGHTING AND UVB

L. albertisii is nocturnal and spends the day hidden. The light should be on for 12 hours a day and switched off completely at night, so the animal has a clear rhythm. If there are plants in the terrarium, a daylight-colour LED lamp can cover part of the length.

UVB is not necessary, but a weak UVB light can be used, because nocturnal reptiles also get a little UV light in the wild. The light must in that case cover part of the terrarium, so the snake can move away from it. The Ferguson zone has not been established for the species.

If extra heat is needed at night, use a heat source without light, for example a ceramic heater or a radiant heat panel.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

L. albertisii eats whole prey. Captive-bred animals get thawed mice and rats and usually eat with great appetite. In the wild juveniles take lizards and may be fussy at first, so buy only animals that have taken several meals of rodents. Use long tongs, because the snake has a strong feeding response and strikes quickly. The prey must be thawed and warmed, never live.

Juveniles are fed every 5-7 days with mice and later small rats. Animals over a year old get one prey item every 10-14 days, and adults get an adult rat or two every second to third week. The prey must be no more than slightly wider than the snake's widest point. Variation with quail, chicks or guinea pigs is possible but not necessary.

The species easily becomes too fat, which can lead to fatty liver. Weigh the snake regularly, and cut back on the amount if it gains weight without growing. If an established animal refuses to eat, it is most often due to wrong temperature or humidity, stress or too much handling. After regurgitation, feeding is skipped for at least two weeks, and the next meal must be smaller. Vitamin supplements are not necessary when feeding whole prey.

Read more: Calcium, vitamins and supplements

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

L. albertisii is fast, alert and often defensive, and many animals never become completely calm. Captive-bred animals are milder than wild-caught ones, which can keep their sharpness all their lives. The species is very shy and strikes quickly, especially in the terrarium. Bites are not dangerous but can bleed, because the teeth are long and backward-curved. A bite in connection with feeding makes the snake hold on and coil around the hand.

Use a snake hook to lift the animal out, so it can tell handling from feeding. Support the whole body, use slow movements, and keep your hands away from the head. Keep sessions short, five to ten minutes, while the animal gets used to being handled. Wash your hands first, so the scent does not resemble prey. It takes months, not weeks, and some animals only tolerate handling without enjoying it. Restraining makes the animal more frightened and triggers bites. A coiled body, quick tongue flicks and an S-shaped neck mean the animal is not ready.

The animals must live alone, because several together cause stress and a risk of infection. Two animals are put together only for a short, supervised mating. Children should not handle the snake.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

There is no clear difference in size between the sexes, so sex is most reliably determined by probing, which only a vet or an experienced keeper should carry out. The animals reach sexual maturity after three to four years. The female must be fully grown and in good condition before she is bred. What weight she should have is not documented.

MATING

Only little documented knowledge exists about mating in the species. The animals must live apart, and only for breeding is the male put into the female's terrarium. Keep watch on them, because a pair does not always get along, and this may only be seen once they are put together. Whether a cool period or shorter days promotes breeding is not documented. The species comes from a tropical climate without distinct seasons, so any changes in temperature and light must be small.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female lays about a dozen eggs; the exact variation is not documented. The eggs stick together in a tight clump, and the female coils around them in a tight spiral. She needs a dark, quiet hide with a moist substrate, for example a laying box, and must not be disturbed. How many clutches she lays per year is not documented.

INCUBATION

The eggs incubate in about two months. The incubation temperature is not documented for the species; 30-32 °C is borrowed from related pythons. The female may incubate the eggs herself, or they are placed in an incubator in moist perlite or vermiculite and are not turned. The young are about 40 cm long at hatching.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

The young are kept singly in a small, tight terrarium with a hide, coconut fibre and a dish of water, and the same high humidity as the adults. The first meals are small mice, offered with tongs. In the wild juveniles take lizards, and some are fussy at first, so a short transition with small lizards or mice scented with lizard may be necessary. Juveniles are fed every 5-7 days. They are fully grown after three to four years.

Health and common mistakes

Leiopython albertisii is sensitive to faults in heat and humidity. The most frequent problems are:

- Respiratory infections from too low a temperature, air that is too dry or too wet, or poor hygiene: wheezing breathing, mucus from the nose, open mouth and lethargy. This requires a vet.
- Scale rot, if the substrate never dries: discoloured, soft or blistered belly scales. Let the substrate dry between mistings, and provide branches so the snake can dry itself.
- Mites: small black dots, especially at the eyes, neck and vent, and the animal often lies in the water. Check new animals in quarantine.
- Dehydration, because the skin is thin and dries out in air that is too dry.
- Obesity and fatty liver from too frequent feeding. Weigh the animal regularly.
- Regurgitation from prey that is too large or stress. Skip feeding for at least two weeks, and check the temperature.
- Burns from bulbs without a guard.
- Serpentovirus (formerly called nidovirus), which is widespread among pythons in captivity. It causes respiratory disease with mucus and an open mouth, the infection does not go away, and many infected animals die. Quarantine new animals,

and have them tested at a vet before they come near other pythons.

See a vet with reptile experience if the animal loses weight, refuses food for several weeks, the breathing sounds wrong, or the skin is damaged.

Read more: Quarantine and hygiene

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.