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SNAKES

Borneo Short-tailed Python

Python breitensteini

Python breitensteini is a heavy-bodied, short-tailed python from the lowland forests and swamp edges of Borneo, yellowish brown to dark brown with darker blotches and often a yellow head. It reaches 120-150 cm, weighs several kilos and eats rats. It is kept in a large, ventilated floor-space enclosure with stable heat, 60-70% humidity and a large water bowl.

Family: Pythonidae Former name: *Python curtus breitensteini; Aspidoboa breitensteini*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**120-150 cm** total length incl. tail
Weight	**4,000-7,000 g**
Lifespan	**20-25 years**
Active	**At dusk and at night**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial**
Habitat	**Rainforest and wetland**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**120 × 60 × 45 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**27-28 °C**
Basking spot	**30-31 °C**
Temperature, night	**25-26 °C**
Humidity	**60-70%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Not required**
Diet	**Vertebrates**
Kept	**Singly**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Sexually mature	**36-48 months**
Clutch size	**12-30 eggs**
Incubation	**60-75 days** at 31-32 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Python breitensteini is a heavily built python with a broad head, a short, tapering tail and heat-sensitive pits along the lips. The ground colour ranges from pale yellowish brown to dark coffee brown with brown, black and white markings, and the head is usually yellow. Juveniles have a more contrasting pattern than adults. It is not red: the red colour forms belong to *P. brongersmai* alone. The species name honours the physician Heinrich Breitenstein, who collected reptiles on Borneo in the 1800s.

Adults are 120-150 cm including the tail, and a few approach 180 cm. Females are larger and more heavily built than males, which have longer heads relative to their bodies. An adult typically weighs 4-7 kg, because the body is so stout. Newly hatched young are 20-30 cm long. The species was once regarded as a subspecies of *Python curtus*, but has been a separate species since 2001, like *P. brongersmai*. In the trade the three short-tailed pythons are often mixed up under shared trade names, so always ask for the scientific name and the animal's origin.

The species huffs and hisses loudly when it feels threatened. The poor reputation the group gained from wild-caught adults does not apply to today's captive-bred animals, which are normally calm. The figure for lifespan is borrowed from *P. curtus*: 20-25 years. The species suits keepers with experience of tropical humidity and heavy pythons.

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

Distribution and habitat

Python breitensteini occurs only on Borneo: in Indonesia (Kalimantan), Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) and Brunei. The type locality is Teweh on Borneo. *P. curtus* lives on Sumatra, and *P. brongersmai* on Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula and nearby islands.

Animals in the trade come mainly from Indonesia. Many are hatched in captivity from wild-caught, gravid females and then exported, while others have been bred for several generations.

> **Native range:** Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei.

HABITAT

Python breitensteini lives in tropical lowland forest, in swampy areas and on poorly drained floodplains. It also occurs in artificially irrigated farmland. It is terrestrial and lies very still, often coiled in cover, waiting in ambush for prey. It is most active in the evening and at night.

The climate is warm and humid all year. The species drinks a great deal and readily lies in water, which explains its need for stable warmth, high humidity and a large water bowl in the enclosure.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

An adult *Python breitensteini* needs an enclosure of at least 120 × 60 × 45 cm (length × width × height). The species is terrestrial, so floor area matters more than height. Little husbandry data exists for the species itself, so the recommendations build on the two closely related short-tailed pythons, *Python curtus* and *Python brongersmai*, which have the same requirements.

Juveniles start in a small, closed box of about 25 × 15 × 10 cm with ventilation holes and move to larger boxes as they grow. Rooms that are too large stress juveniles and can make them stop feeding. Plastic boxes hold heat and humidity easily and suit the species well. If glass is used, part of the mesh must be covered.

The enclosure must be escape-proof with a solid, lockable lid. Plain kraft paper in several layers is a practical, hygienic substrate in which the snake can burrow between the layers. Aspen shavings under the paper can also be used. Provide at least two hides, one at each end of the gradient, so the snake can lie snugly. The snake is kept alone.

TEMPERATURE

By day the temperature should be 27-28 °C and by night 25-26 °C. If the snake has a warm spot, it should be 30-31 °C. Stable temperatures matter more than high ones, and excessive heat stresses the species.

Heat is best supplied from above by a ceramic heater or a radiant heat panel controlled by a thermostat. A heat mat can be used, but must be thermostat-controlled. Measure the temperature with a digital thermometer at both ends of the enclosure.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Humidity should stay at 60-70%. If the air is too dry, shedding is poor and the skin comes off in pieces or sticks altogether. If the enclosure is constantly wet, scales and skin become wrinkled and the risk of respiratory infection rises. The aim is humid but not stagnant air.

Plastic boxes hold humidity easily. Evaporation from the water bowl is normally enough. When the snake is about to shed, mist the box until the skin has come off.

The species drinks a great deal and readily lies in water, so the water bowl must be large enough for the whole snake to lie in, and made of heavy ceramic or solid plastic that will not tip over. Change the water daily. If the snake lies in the water almost constantly, the enclosure may be too warm, a hide may be missing, or the snake may have mites.

LIGHTING AND UVB

Python breitensteini is most active in the evening and at night, but needs a fixed day-night rhythm of 12 hours of light and 12 hours of darkness controlled by a timer. The enclosure should not be brightly lit. Shade and dark hides matter more than light. UVB is not necessary for this nocturnal, secretive species, and no requirement for UVB in captivity has been documented.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

Python breitensteini eats rats from juvenile to adult. Juveniles start on hopper mice and quickly move on to rat pups. Frozen and thawed rodents are recommended, because a live prey item left in the enclosure can injure the snake. Thaw the prey, and warm it in a closed bag in hot water until it is pleasantly warm to the touch: the snake locates prey with heat-sensitive pits in the lips, and cold prey arouses no interest. Offer it with long tongs.

The width of the prey should match the widest part of the snake. Juveniles and young animals are fed weekly. From about three years of age they are fed every 14 days with a medium to large rat, and animals that gain weight easily get smaller prey or are fed every 21 days. The species has a large appetite and a slow metabolism, so overfeeding and obesity are among the most common mistakes.

Droppings come at long intervals: in adults often only every 30 to 45 days, and pauses of four months or more are normal when the snake otherwise feeds and is healthy. In juveniles they often come weekly. Keep a log of feeding, shedding and droppings so that you know the animal's normal rhythm.

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Python breitensteini is sedentary and spends most of the day hidden. It is heavy and must be supported with both hands and forearms, never dangled or draped around the shoulders. The species is vocal and huffs and hisses when handled; this is normal and not necessarily a sign of aggression.

Leave a newly acquired snake alone until it feeds regularly. Keep sessions short, calm and regular, and end them when the snake is relaxed. Never grab the head. Do not handle the snake during shedding or for 72 hours after a meal. Juveniles can be shy and nervous, and an accustomed animal is normally calm.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

Females are larger and heavier than males. Sex is determined most reliably with a probe, which only an experienced person or a vet should use. Sexual maturity at 3-4 years has not been documented for the species itself, but is borrowed from *P. brongersmai*. Females must be fully grown and in good condition before breeding.

MATING

In the wild on Borneo, females lay their eggs from September to November. Whether a cooling period is needed in captivity has not been documented. The animals are kept apart, and the male is introduced to the female under supervision and separated again afterwards. Feed only when the animals are apart. Breeding should only be considered with great care, and the offspring must go to good homes.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

Wild females from Borneo lay an average of 17 eggs, more than *P. brongersmai*, and almost all adult females breed in the same season. The range of 12-30 eggs in the specifications is borrowed from *P. brongersmai*. The female coils around the eggs and does not eat until they have hatched. Give her a closed, dark hide with damp sphagnum or vermiculite.

INCUBATION

Incubation has not been documented for the species. The figures are borrowed from *P. brongersmai*: the eggs hatch after 60-75 days at 31-32 °C and high humidity, on damp vermiculite in a closed container with a few air holes. Do not help the young out of the egg.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

Newly hatched young are 20-30 cm. Keep each one separately in a small, ventilated box with a hide, water bowl and a little warmth, at 27-28 °C and 60-70% humidity. Most start on hopper mice and quickly move on to rat pups once a week. After about six months they move to a box of about 45 × 25 × 20 cm. Young are less forgiving of mistakes than adults, so do not choose a newly hatched snake as a first animal of the species, but a well-established young snake of a few months that feeds well.

Health and common mistakes

Python breitensteini is hardy when the climate is right, but mistakes in humidity and heat quickly cause problems. The typical problems are:

- Respiratory infection with wheezing, mucus and an open mouth. It is usually caused by too little humidity, poor ventilation or too low a temperature. See a vet if the symptoms last more than a few days.
- Wrinkled skin and scale rot when the substrate is constantly wet. Keep the enclosure humid, not wet.
- Stuck shed in air that is too dry. Raise the humidity when the snake is about to shed.
- Obesity from feeding too often or too much.
- Mites, shown by the snake lying constantly in the water bowl.
- Regurgitation if the snake is handled too soon after a meal or given prey that is too large.
- Inclusion body disease (IBD), a viral disease of boas and pythons with nervous symptoms such as star-gazing and chronic regurgitation. There is no treatment, so new animals must be quarantined.

Snakes hide illness. Weighing, notes on feeding and shedding, and regular checks are the best early warning. Contact a vet with reptile experience if the snake loses weight, has breathing problems or does not eat for several months.

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.