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SNAKES

Blood Python

Python brongersmai

Python brongersmai is a heavy, short-tailed python from swamps and forests in South-East Asia, red, orange or yellowish brown with yellow and beige markings. It reaches 120-180 cm, weighs many kilos and eats rodents. It can live for more than 25 years and is kept in a large, closed floor enclosure with stable heat, 60-70 % humidity and a large water bowl.

Family: Pythonidae Former name: *Python curtus brongersmai*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**120-180 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**20-30 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	**26-28 °C**
Basking spot	**30-32 °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 brongersmai is a compact and very powerfully built python with a short tail and a broad, heavy body. The ground colour is red, orange or more rusty brown, and over it lie yellow and beige blotches and stripes along the body as well as black and beige spots on the sides. The belly is white, often with small black marks. The head is normally grey with a white stripe behind the eye. The brightest red animals take two to three years to develop the colour, and young animals are brownish or reddish brown.

Males are smaller than females. Males normally reach 90-150 cm and females 120-180 cm, with a few up to about 240 cm. An adult of 120-150 cm weighs 4.5-7 kg, and older animals can weigh over 9 kg. Newly hatched young are 20-43 cm. Together with *Python curtus* and *Python breitensteini* the species belongs to the short-tailed pythons; all three were regarded as subspecies of *Python curtus* until they were raised to species in 2001. In the trade the three species are easily mixed up.

Wild animals, especially adults from Malaysia, had a reputation for being unpredictable. Captive-bred animals handled calmly from a young age normally become calm. The species is vocal: it hisses and puffs when it feels uneasy, and that is normal. There are many colour and pattern variants (morphs), but this guide deals with the species itself.

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

Distribution and habitat

Python brongersmai lives in South-East Asia: on the Malay Peninsula, in southern Thailand and in Vietnam and on Sumatra east of the central mountain ranges. It is also found on Bangka and several other islands in the Strait of Malacca, among them the Lingga and Riau Islands and Penang. The type locality is Singapore.

> **Native range:** Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam.

HABITAT

P. brongersmai lives in swamps, bogs and humid forest from sea level up to about 650 m. It is also regularly found on oil palm plantations, where rodents are numerous, and the plantations have made the species more common. It lives on the ground and stays hidden under logs and stones and in holes. It is most active at dusk and at night.

Its diet consists almost solely of rodents, especially rats living close to humans, which it seizes from ambush and suffocates. Reproduction is strongly seasonal, and females normally lay eggs every other year. The species is caught on a large scale for the leather industry and for the pet trade.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

An adult animal needs an enclosure of at least 120 × 60 × 45 cm (length × width × height). The species uses only the floor, so floor area is the most important, and the enclosure must be wider than it is tall. Large females need a floor area of 150 × 60 cm. The enclosure must be closed and opaque, because the species is secretive and thrives best when it feels hidden. A wooden or plastic enclosure that tolerates damp is the best choice; open glass cages with mesh lids retain heat and humidity poorly.

Hatchlings need a small, ventilated plastic box of about 25 × 15 cm, because they become insecure and stop eating in rooms that are too large. They are moved to a larger floor area as they grow: about 45 × 25 cm after half a year, about 85 × 45 cm for young adults and then the adult size.

The lid must be lockable, because the snake is strong and will find any weakness. The substrate can be newspaper or kraft paper in several layers (the animal often lies between the layers), coconut fibre or a damp, dust-free layer of cypress mulch or aspen shavings. Avoid cedar and pine. Keep hatchlings on damp kitchen paper. Furnish with a hide at each end of the enclosure, so small that the snake lies snugly in them. Remove droppings and soiled substrate immediately.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

TEMPERATURE

The species thrives at stable, moderate temperatures and tolerates too much heat poorly. The whole enclosure is kept at 26-28 °C by day and 25-26 °C at night. If local heat is provided, the warm spot must be 30-32 °C, measured with an infrared thermometer, and the cool end 27 °C. Use a heat mat or heat cable on one side, always with a thermostat. Temperatures below 18 °C are harmful.

Heating the whole room is an alternative that gives an even temperature. Never use hot rocks. Place the enclosure away from windows, where the sun can overheat it.

An animal that spends days in the water bowl or flees from the heat is too hot. An animal that does not eat or lies tightly coiled is often too cold.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

The humidity should be 60-70 %, measured with a digital hygrometer in the middle of the enclosure. The species should not be kept wet: too damp causes wrinkled, shiny skin and respiratory infections, and too dry causes shedding problems. If the water bowl stands in the middle of the temperature gradient, enough evaporates to maintain the humidity, and the ventilation must be good enough that the air does not become stagnant. During shedding the enclosure is misted daily, and a humid hide helps.

Always provide a large water bowl, so the animal can lie in it. The species drinks a lot and loves to lie in water. Change the water daily. If the animal lies in the water for several days without coming out, the enclosure is too hot, or the animal has mites; small black dots in the water that look like poppy seeds are a sign of mites.

Read more: Common diseases and signs of illness

LIGHTING AND UVB

The species is crepuscular and nocturnal, and UVB is not necessary but can be used. Ordinary light in a room with a natural day-night rhythm is enough, and the light is switched on for about 12 hours. Do not provide light at night.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

P. brongersmai is a carnivore and must be given whole prey. Rats are the ideal prey throughout life; newly hatched young are often started on hopper mice and switch within a few meals to rat pups. Feed thawed, frozen prey and warm it before feeding to about 40 °C, so the snake's heat-sensitive labial pits have a target. Use long feeding tongs.

The species has a slow metabolism and a big appetite, so it easily becomes too fat. If it is too fat, feed less often or use smaller prey. A healthy animal has a slightly raised ridge along the middle of the back and a soft slope down towards the sides. The back must not be flat or round, and the spine must not stand out sharply.

Feeding frequency: - Young: once a week. - Adults: every 2 weeks with medium to large rats. - Animals that are gaining weight: every 3 weeks or smaller prey.

After feeding the animal must be left in peace. Defecation is infrequent: adults can go 1-2 months, some even longer, without defecating, as long as they eat and thrive.

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

P. brongersmai requires a calm and decisive keeper. Give a new animal about 2 weeks in peace, and begin handling only when it eats regularly. Keep the first sessions short, a few minutes. Support the whole weight of the body with both hands and forearms, and avoid hanging the snake or draping it over the shoulders. Do not grab for the head. Hatchlings are nervous and may twist, strike and bite when handled too much.

Hissing and puffing are normal and a sign that the snake feels insecure. Do not handle the animal during shedding, right after feeding or when it is stressed. Wash your hands before and after, because reptiles can carry Salmonella.

Keep the animals separately. There is no benefit to the animals in living together, and they should meet only for mating.

Read more: Quarantine and hygiene

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

Males are smaller and have a longer, thicker tail base than females, and females reach sexual maturity at a greater length than males. The sex is most reliably determined with a probe, which only an experienced person should use. The animals reach sexual maturity after 3-4 years. Females must be fully grown and in good condition before being bred.

MATING

Reproduction is strongly seasonal, and in the wild females normally lay eggs every other year. Whether a cooling period is necessary in captivity is not documented. The animals are kept separately, and the male is placed with the female under supervision and separated again afterwards. Feed only when the animals are apart. A female should not be bred every year.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The clutch averages 12-16 large eggs, each weighing 83-90 g, and clutches of up to 30 eggs occur. The female lies coiled around the eggs and does not eat until they have hatched. The time of egg-laying in captivity is not documented. Provide a closed, dark lay box with damp sphagnum or vermiculite.

INCUBATION

The eggs hatch after about 2-2.5 months (60-75 days). Temperature and humidity during artificial incubation are not documented for the species. The figures are borrowed from *Python regius*: 31-32 °C and high humidity, with the eggs on damp vermiculite in a closed container with a few air holes. The young stay in the egg for a day or two while absorbing the yolk sac. Do not help with hatching.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

Hatchlings are 20-43 cm. Place each young snake separately in a small, ventilated box with a hide, water and a little heat, and keep them on damp kitchen paper at 60-70 % humidity. Mist the box every other day. Most start on hopper mice and quickly move on to rat pups, once a week. Young are less forgiving of mistakes than adults, so do not choose a newly hatched young; a well-established young snake of a few months that eats well is a better choice.

Health and common mistakes

Most problems are caused by mistakes in the setup. The typical ones are:

- Obesity from meals that are too large or too frequent. It reduces breeding results and makes respiratory problems harder to cope with.
- Respiratory infection from air that is too damp, stagnant or cold: the animal breathes with an open mouth, gurgles or has a runny nose. The species develops it easily.
- Shedding problems from air that is too dry: the animal sheds incompletely or in pieces. Provide a humid hide and mist the enclosure.
- Skin that looks wet, shiny and wrinkled from persistently high humidity, which causes bacterial and fungal growth.
- Mites, which show up as black dots in the water bowl and make the animal lie in the water for days.
- Overheating, if the animal spends a long time in the water.
- Bites from live prey. Use thawed prey.

A healthy animal has clear eyes, a plump body and eats regularly. Weigh the animal regularly, because sudden weight loss is often the first sign of illness. Reptiles hide illness, so see a vet with reptile experience if the animal does not eat, loses weight, breathes with an open mouth or seems lethargic.

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.