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SNAKES

Sumatran Short-tailed Python

Python curtus

Python curtus is a heavy, short-tailed python from the swamp forests and rainforests of Sumatra, dark brown to jet black, often with a grey or silvery head. It reaches 110-150 cm, weighs several kilos and eats rats. It lives 20-25 years and is kept in a large, ventilated enclosure with plenty of floor space with stable heat, 60-80% humidity and a large water bowl.

Family: Pythonidae Former name: *Aspidoboa curta*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**110-150 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	**26-28 °C**
Basking spot	**30-31 °C**
Temperature, night	**25-26 °C**
Humidity	**60-80%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Not required**
Diet	**Vertebrates**
Kept	**Singly**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Sexually mature	**36-48 months**
Clutch size	**6-12 eggs**
Incubation	**75-90 days** at 31-32 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Python curtus is a stout, heavily built python with a very short tail in proportion to the body. Adults are dark brown to jet black with a black, grey or silvery head; a few have an orange or yellow head. The species has no red or orange colour forms; only *P. brongersmai* has those. Young are paler than adults and darken markedly as they grow. The species name *curtus* is Latin for short.

Adults measure 110-150 cm including the tail, and a few old animals can reach up to 2 m. Females are clearly larger and heavier than males. An adult of 120-150 cm typically weighs 4-7 kg, far more than many longer snakes, because the body is so stout. Newly hatched young are 20-30 cm long. The species is the smallest of the three short-tailed pythons. The other two, *P. brongersmai* and *P. breitensteini*, were formerly regarded as subspecies of *P. curtus*, but since 2001 they have been species in their own right, with their own guides. In the trade the three are often mixed up under common trade names, so always ask for the scientific name and the animal's origin.

The species is vocal: when threatened it hisses and puffs loudly and may bite, but captive-bred animals are normally calm once they are used to handling. The bad reputation the group acquired with the wild-caught adults imported in the past does not fit today's captive-bred animals. The species suits keepers with experience of tropical humidity and heavy pythons. Lifespan is 20-25 years.

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

Distribution and habitat

Python curtus lives on Sumatra in Indonesia, in the southern and western parts of the island, and on the nearby islands of Bangka and Siberut. The type locality is Sumatra. The species does not occur in Thailand, and records from Singapore probably refer to *Malayopython reticulatus*.

P. brongersmai lives in eastern and northern Sumatra and on the Malay Peninsula, and *P. breitensteini* on Borneo. Animals in the trade come mostly 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.

HABITAT

Python curtus lives in tropical lowland forest, swamp forest and bogs, and along riverbanks and streams. It is ground-dwelling and very still, lying coiled in hiding or half buried in soil and leaves and ambushing rodents and birds along narrow paths near water. It is most active in the evening and at night and comes out to drink, lie in the water and hunt.

The climate is hot and humid all year with little difference between the seasons. The soil is damp and consists of thick layers of plant material. The species drinks a great deal and likes to lie in water. This explains the species' requirements for high humidity, stable heat and a large water bowl in the enclosure.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

An adult *Python curtus* needs an enclosure of at least 120 × 60 × 45 cm (length × width × height). The species is ground-dwelling and rarely climbs, so floor area matters more than height; very tall enclosures only make it harder to hold the humidity. Young start in a small, closed box, for example 25 × 15 × 10 cm with ventilation holes, and are moved to larger boxes as they grow. Spaces that are too large stress young snakes and can make them stop eating.

The best material is PVC or other plastic with a few, well-placed ventilation openings, because it retains heat and moisture better than glass. If glass is used, most of the mesh must be covered, and you must mist more often. The enclosure must be tight and have a solid, lockable lid, because the snake is strong. Use a substrate of coconut fibre, coconut chips or cypress mulch, 7-10 cm deep, kept damp but not wet. Ordinary kitchen roll or kraft paper in several layers is a practical, hygienic solution where you regulate the humidity yourself. Avoid pine and cedar.

Provide at least two hides that fit closely around the thick body, one at each end of the gradient, and ideally cover three of the enclosure's sides. The snake is kept alone. Replace the whole substrate every 4-6 weeks, and remove faeces immediately.

TEMPERATURE

The enclosure needs a slight gradient: 26-28 °C during the day with a warm spot of 30-31 °C at one end and 25-26 °C at night. The species tolerates heat poorly: above 32 °C it becomes stressed, stops eating and in the worst case may develop neurological symptoms. Fluctuations must be small.

Heat is best supplied from above by a ceramic heater or a radiant heat panel, always controlled by a thermostat with the probe at the snake's level. A heat mat can be used, but the heavy snake presses itself down against the floor and easily gets burns, so it must lie under the hide and be thermostat-controlled. Never use heat rocks. Measure the temperature with digital thermometers at both ends of the enclosure. If the room is cold at night, add heat without light.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Humidity is the most important environmental factor for *Python curtus*. The humidity should stay steady at 60-80%. Below 60% for a longer period causes shedding problems and respiratory infections, and a constantly wet enclosure causes wrinkled skin and scale rot. The aim is humid but not stagnant air.

Keep the humidity up with a deep, damp substrate, partly covered ventilation openings and a large water bowl. Mist the enclosure as needed, especially when the snake is about to shed, and check that the substrate dries out easily between mistings. The water bowl should be large enough for the whole snake to lie in and made of heavy ceramic so that it does not tip over. The species drinks a great deal and often lies in the water, especially before shedding and after meals. Change the water daily and clean the bowl, because the snake often defecates in the water. If the snake lies constantly in the water, the enclosure may be too hot, a hide may be missing, or the snake may have mites. A hygrometer in the enclosure shows whether the humidity holds.

Read more: Common diseases and signs of illness

LIGHTING AND UVB

Python curtus is most active in the evening and at night, but needs a regular day-night rhythm. 12 hours of light and 12 hours of darkness controlled by a timer suit the species' equatorial home. The enclosure should not be brightly lit, and shade and dark hides are more important than light.

UVB is not necessary for this nocturnal, hidden species, and no UVB requirement is documented in captivity. A weak UVB tube can be used as daylight, as long as the snake can withdraw from the light. Night lighting is unnecessary.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

Python curtus eats whole, frozen and thawed rodents. Rats are the standard, from rat pups for young through medium-sized to large rats for adults. Live prey is discouraged, because the rodent can injure the snake. Thaw the prey in the fridge the night before, and warm it in a sealed bag in warm water just before feeding, because the snake finds prey with the heat-sensitive pits in its lips, and cold prey arouses no interest. Feed with long tweezers and calm movements, because the snake has a strong feeding reflex.

The width of the prey should match the widest part of the snake. Young and growing animals are fed every 7-10 days. From about three years of age, feed every 14 days with a medium to large rat, and animals that put on weight easily get smaller prey or are fed every 21 days, adjusted to weight and condition. These are guideline figures. A healthy snake is firm and muscular with a slightly rounded cross-section; if the body is soft and doughy and the spine disappears in fat, it is being overfed. The species has a big appetite and a slow metabolism, so overfeeding and obesity are among the most common mistakes.

Do not handle the snake for at least 72 hours after a meal, because regurgitation is a serious strain. After regurgitation, wait at least two weeks and then offer markedly smaller prey. Repeated regurgitation needs a vet. Faeces may come at intervals of several weeks, in adults up to four months, without being a problem if the snake eats and is otherwise healthy. Weigh the snake regularly.

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Python curtus is sedentary and spends most of the day hidden and motionless; this is normal. It is heavy and strong and must be supported with both hands and forearms. Animals that are used to handling are calm, while young can be nervous and bite. The species puffs and hisses loudly when uneasy, and this is normal and not necessarily a sign of aggression.

Leave a newly acquired snake in peace until it eats regularly before handling it. Keep sessions short, calm and regular, and end them when the snake is relaxed. Never grab the head or the tail, and do not dangle it. Do not handle the snake while it is shedding or for 72 hours after a meal. If it bites, do not tear it loose. Wash the wounds with soap and water. A large snake is best handled when another adult is present.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

As adults, females are larger and heavier than males. Sexing with a probe at the vent must be carried out by an experienced person or a vet. Sexual maturity depends more on size and condition than on age. Age is not documented for the species; the figure in the specifications is borrowed from *P. brongersmai*, where the animals become sexually mature after 3-4 years.

Females must be fully grown and in good condition before they are paired.

MATING

Whether a cooling period with slightly lower temperature is necessary to trigger mating is not documented for the species. 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 separated. Breeding should only be considered with great care, and the offspring must have good homes.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female lays few but large eggs, rarely more than about a dozen. The lower figure in the specifications is an estimate. The female coils around the clutch and may shiver to produce heat if the temperature falls. Give her a dark, humid hide to lay in.

INCUBATION

The eggs are moved to an incubator without being turned. The incubation temperature is not documented for the species; 31-32 °C is borrowed from close relatives. The eggs hatch after 2.5-3 months (75-90 days).

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

Newly hatched young are 20-30 cm long and paler than adults. They are kept singly in small, ventilated boxes with a hide and water bowl at 26-28 °C and, after the first shed, are offered a small rat pup once a week. Young are more vulnerable to errors in humidity and heat than adults, so do not choose a hatchling as your first animal of the species, but a well-established young snake of a few months that eats well.

Health and common mistakes

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

- Respiratory infection with wheezy breathing, mucus and an open mouth. It is most often caused by humidity that is too low, poor ventilation or too low a temperature. Needs a vet if the symptoms last more than a couple of days.
- Scale rot, when the substrate is constantly wet and the air stagnant. Keep the substrate damp, not wet.
- Poor shedding in air that is too dry. Raise the humidity when the snake is about to shed.
- Overweight from feeding that is too frequent or too large.
- Regurgitation, if the snake is handled too close to a meal or is given prey that is too large.
- Inclusion body disease (IBD), a viral disease in boas and pythons with neurological 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.