



WESTERN HOGNOSE (HETERODON NASICUS)

Care Guide

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General Information

Western hognose snakes are a small member of the hognose snake genus, heterodon (other members of which include the eastern hognose, southern hognose, and Mexican hognose). They are colubrids native to central and western North America, from Canada down to Texas. While they have multiple other common nicknames (bluffer, faux viper, spoonbill snake), they are commonly referred to (affectionately) by their keepers as hogs or hoggies.

Behavior

The western hognose is a diurnal reptile, meaning it is primarily active during the day. It is a phlegmatic animal and does not tend to bite as a defense mechanism. Part of what makes hognoses so fun is that they are more likely to bluff strike, meaning basically they will headbutt (though with the lower jaw) if they are scared. They also commonly flatten their head (like mimicking a cobra's hood) and hiss. Larger hognoses can be seen visibly sucking air into their bodies to then expel, causing a hiss that may sound reminiscent of a rattlesnake's rattle.

Another defense mechanism western hognoses commonly employ is playing dead. Here they will flip themselves over and expose their belly, often also sticking out their tongue and in some cases even expelling their waste or musk (foul-scented expression from glands...not fun).

Hoggies are typically more active in their enclosures than common snakes like ball pythons. They will move around more and will burrow and dig tunnels in their substrate (after all, that's what they have a shovel-snoot for). Because of this it may be necessary to "dig them up" when it is feeding time if they are burrowed when you go to feed. More on this below.

Size

Western hognoses do not get very big compared to other commonly kept snakes like pythons. Adults will range from 12" to 36", with the males rarely exceeding the lower end of the spectrum. Females tend to be bigger, with adult females often dwarfing their male counterparts by a factor of two. It is not uncommon for breeding males to be half the size of a female, or even less. Due to their size, western hognoses make great pets for smaller areas.

Hatchlings are typically no larger than a pencil, and most juveniles available on the market will weigh roughly 10g (grams) when they are first available for sale.

Enclosure (Size)

Enclosure sizes may vary. Many hognose owners find their hoggies adapt better and accept meals better in small enclosures, especially in the juvenile to sub-adult phase. While a large enclosure may be more necessary for common reptiles like bearded dragons or ball pythons, a juvenile hognose will require much less space. They typically do fine in small plastic bins while they are young (just be sure to use one with a locking lid and allow for proper ventilation [air holes]).

For a *normal* enclosure, the 18x18x12 Exo Terra is a good option. This works fine for small hognoses all the way up to adult males. Adult females, however, will likely require something bigger, like the 24x18x12 Exo Terra. They will also need good places to hide, so make sure to include that.

Substrate (Bedding)

The most common substrate for western hognose is Aspen. Aspen can be found in various forms (shredded, shaved, chips), but typically the shredded is better as it allows them to burrow and holds its shape. Hoggies are natural burrowers / tunnellers, and they will feel more at home and safe when they can dig. Some breeders have switched to using shredded hemp fiber instead of Aspen and have seen good results.

Aspen is most common in part because it is inexpensive and easy to clean. However, make sure to not get any sort of bedding that is treated or scented, as hognose snakes are quite susceptible to respiratory issues (due to their burrowing). This means avoid softwoods like pine and cedar.

Another option gaining popularity is to go Bio-Active. The best option to simplify going Bio-Active is to purchase a kit from someone like The Bio Dude. Their Terra Sahara substrate is great for hognose snakes as it holds a good amount of humidity without getting overly humid, holds its shape well (for those tunnels), and is natural, perfectly mimicking a natural environment.

Feeding

In the wild, the western hognose feeds on a variety of prey, from small reptiles and amphibians (lizards, frogs, toads, etc.) to small birds and rodents. In captive situations, most western hognoses thrive on a diet consisting of primarily or entirely rodents.

Some hoggies can be very picky eaters. This is one area (out of many) where knowing your breeder is essential. A reputable breeder should never sell a baby hognose before it has taken multiple meals and been well-established on frozen/thawed pinky mice. This is sometimes easier said than done. While there is no established or official law here, the rule of thumb is that the snake should have taken at least 10 meals of unscented (more on that in the FAQ) frozen/thawed (f/t) pinkies.

Most hoggies will take the mouse right from the tongs, however some prefer drop feeding. In our experience this is about 70-30 (70% will take it from the tongs, 30% will not). In cases where drop feeding is more effective, be sure to leave a small plastic dish in the enclosure and leave the mouse on it (alternatively, a small paper towel tube may also work, as it also doubles as a hide and allows the snake to feel safe while eating). This is a great question to ask your breeder: how has he/she been feeding?

Aside from mice, western hognoses also tend to enjoy Reptilinks, which are typically a blend of frog and rabbit or frog and quail meats (think of a hot dog). These may be good options if your hognose is refusing to eat (but again: check the FAQ). Rodents are great for hognoses because they are part of this complete breakfast! Also, they contain all the necessary nutrients to keep them healthy. You will want to avoid handling a hognose within 24 hours on either side of scheduled feeding. If you plan to feed on Wednesday evening, do not handle after Tuesday afternoon, or before Thursday evening. This gives them time for their digestive processes and helps to keep them from regurgitating their food (which is dangerous for them, and gross for you). Occasional food items offered like canned tuna or salmon or sardines (in water, of course), as well as small quail, are also good to mix things up as your hog gets older. Just make sure not to deviate too far from a standard rodent diet, just because not all prey items contain all the necessary nutrients. You should also avoid anything with a source you're unsure of, and always avoid feeding wild caught prey (as you never know what sort of parasites or other issues they may have).

Water & Humidity

While hognose snakes are native to moderately dry areas, they still need water (who doesn't!). Typically, a small water dish in their enclosure is perfect. If you're using a small Sterilite container, be sure not to overdo it on the water dish, as this will increase the humidity level above where it should be. Any small habitats are susceptible to over-watering (technically so are large ones), which can in turn breed mold. As previously noted, hognoses are prone to respiratory infections, so mold is not your friend! Water dishes will need to be checked regularly and cleaned / refilled at least weekly. A lot of breeders have extra water dishes and swap the dish out for a clean (and refilled) one at each feeding.

Humidity levels should be between 35-60%. Too high and your hognose could suffer from respiratory issues, though too low and they may have trouble shedding or even refuse to eat. If you're keeping the, on aspen bedding, it is very difficult to maintain the higher end of this range (50-60%) because aspen tends to develop mold when humidity rises this high.

Lighting, Heat, & Temperature

For hatchlings and juveniles, many hognose keepers use belly heat. In fact, many breeders use exclusively belly heat for even their adult hognoses. The thinking is that, in the wild, hognoses are typically burrowed or otherwise sheltered and so their light exposure would be minimal. While this is common and belly-heat is effective, there is a growing awareness that hognose snakes in their natural environment do in fact need light exposure, especially UVB, in order to thrive and synthesize vitamin D3.

At E. B. Exotics, all our adult hognoses get heat and UVB from their lighting. All hatchlings and juveniles stay on belly heat until they get a bit bigger and in need of an enclosure upgrade.

While UVB may not be required for the snake to survive, we nevertheless strongly recommend setting up UVB for your hoggie. Both heat and UVB bulbs should be set to day/night cycle; 12 hours on and 12 off is a good default setting (though some choose to do 14 on / 10 off in the summer and spring, and 10 on / 14 off in the fall and winter).

Temps for your hognose with heat lamps should be 90°-95°F on the basking side, and 70°-75°F on the cool side. Allotting enough space for both temperature zones allows the snake the freedom to get comfortable however they need. The higher heat side is necessary to aid in digestion as well. Even for belly heat these are the temperatures you'll want to maintain, albeit there isn't much technical "basking" if there are no lamps. Be sure to use a thermometer and hygrometer to monitor temps and moisture levels. A temperature gun is also useful for checking habitat temps. It is also best advised to get a thermometer to control your belly heat source, so that if something goes wrong, it will turn off. We have seen incidents where faulty equipment caused underbelly heat tape to stay on and heat too long, resulting in many lost hogs. Let's work on avoiding such tragedies.

Brumation

For a hognose, as with many kinds of snakes, brumation is sort of like hibernation. It isn't technically hibernation, because hibernation is for warm-blooded animals and is a deep sleep state. Brumation is only for cold-blooded animals and the animal is not in a constant sleep state.

The similarities between hibernation and brumation exceed the differences, though. During brumation a hognose's metabolism will slow down along with their heart rate and respiratory function. Many hognose keepers have noticed their hoggie will stop eating and become slow or sluggish as outside temperatures begin to drop. Even when their environment hasn't changed, they tend to have a natural sense of when it is time to brumate. Because of this, many keepers will put their hognoses into brumation in a controlled environment. In captivity, it isn't really required that a hognose brumate since their environment temperatures are controlled.

It is still a good practice however, especially if you're getting into breeding, to allow them to brumate as they would naturally. Depending on your location, this can be done by putting them into your basement or garage, however it is safest to put them into a space where you can control the temperature more precisely.

For that, we at E. B. Exotics use wine chillers, and put our hogs into small Sterilite containers with locking lids. We place a small water dish inside the container with them, but they do not eat during this time.

We begin by bringing their temp down slowly. First by reducing their heat source and eventually letting the ambient temp in the reptile room fall to room temperature. After that they go into their containers and into the wine chiller at 65° (often the highest temp setting). Then every day or two we reduce the temp a degree or two until they are gradually brought down to 55°. You want to keep them no lower than 50° during brumation. Also be sure to open the door periodically to let the air freshen up, and make sure they have some water in a small dish. They may be in brumation, but they are still breathing and drinking.

Shedding

All snakes shed...right? You should expect no less from a western hognose. Hatchlings and juveniles shed more often than adults because they're growing. Most adult females will have a pre-ovulation shed when they're in breeding season (and typically a pre-lay shed as well).

When a hognose is getting ready to shed they will go into "blue." This is so-called because their eye-caps grow cloudy and a blue/grey color. Another nickname for a snake going into blue is "zombie mode." Don't be alarmed if it takes a week or more for your hognose to completely finish shedding. However, one thing you do need to be on the lookout for is stuck shed. Stuck shed is exactly what it sounds like: skin that didn't finish shedding. It can hurt the snake and even lead to serious health problems. If your hognose has finished shedding and still can't seem to get the last bits off, you may need to help them by gently removing it. Giving them a soak in warm (not hot) water can also help.

To aid in preventing stuck shed, especially if your hognose's habitat is in a room that has very low humidity levels, you may want to add a humidity hide (aka humidity box) to their enclosure. This is often a small Sterilite container (or even Tupperware) box with a lid, filled with some sort of substrate that holds moisture like sphagnum moss or coco fiber. You can also use damp paper towels. Cut a hole into the box large enough for the snake to get into and out of. Keep in mind though that a humidity hide should not be left in the snake's enclosure indefinitely. It should be added when they are about to shed, and removed after they are done. Leaving it in can lead to issues like scale rot or respiratory problems from the snake staying in a wet environment too long.

FAQ

Are Western Hognose Snakes Venomous?

In the conventional sense: no.

But to be more technically precise...sort of. See, hognose snakes are rear-fanged. There are different types of fangs for different snakes. When people think of venomous reptiles like rattlesnakes or vipers, they think of the type of fangs that are hollow and meant to inject venom like hypodermic needles. Other snakes have fangs that are solid and are more like teeth. Hognoses possess the latter.

There exists still some debate as to how to classify the hognose fangs. Additionally, hoggies do possess a Duvernoy's gland, which is similar to a venom gland, yet distinct according to many biologists and zoologists.

What this ultimately means for the hognose keeper is that they do have small fangs at the back of their mouths, and they do have Duvernoy's glands that produce a toxin. However, these fangs do not function like the fangs of various vipers or elapids that are intended to inject immobilizing venom into prey. Rather, hognose fangs are intended to catch and hold prey while they swallow, and the toxin they secrete is intended to aid in swallowing.¹ Due to the function of the Duvernoy's gland and the rear-fangs, the "venom" that a hognose produces is not injected by hollow fangs but is more "chewed" into the prey as it is consumed.²

To really get at the heart of the question: hognose snakes can bite, and they can secrete a toxic substance. But their fangs do not inject venom and their "venom" is non-lethal to humans.

A bite from a western hognose is rare, but they do occur. Typically, they will result in mild skin irritation and/or itching and redness, but symptoms typically resolve very quickly without intervention. However, all reptile keepers should use their best judgment and discretion if they believe they are having a reaction to any reptile bite. At the time of this publication (March of 2023) there are no documented medical cases of anyone ever dying from a western hognose bite. The worst that we have heard reports of at E. B. Exotics is someone having an allergic reaction akin to the reactions that some people experience with insect stings from bees or wasps.

From our own personal experience, a bite briefly stings, turns a little red, and itches for about half an hour, then subsides. But once again: use your best judgment any time you are bitten by an animal.

Do Western Hognose Snakes Often Go on Hunger Strikes?

Often...no. However, it is a common complaint that people have. Just join a hognose group or two on Facebook or follow one on Reddit and you'll quickly see that people are often posting, "It's been three weeks since he's eaten, what do I do!?!?!?"

¹ Kenneth V. Kardong (2002) COLUBRID SNAKES AND DUVERNOY'S "VENOM" GLANDS, *Journal of Toxicology: Toxin Reviews*, 21:1-2, 1-19, DOI: 10.1081/TXR-120004739

² Stephen P. Mackessy, Anthony J. Saviola, *Understanding Biological Roles of Venoms Among the Caenophidia: The Importance of Rear-Fanged Snakes*, *Integrative and Comparative Biology*, Volume 56, Issue 5, November 2016, Pages 1004–1021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/icb/icw110>

Western hognose snakes, as noted above, can be picky eaters. In some cases, they will refuse a meal for legitimate reasons. When this happens, you shouldn't be worried. Just offer them food at their next regular feeding time. These may include:

- In blue. A western hognose that has gone full zombie is getting ready to shed. They can't see well and are often more skittish in this stage. When this happens it is common for a hoggie to skip a meal. Don't worry about it. Just keep an eye on them and when they are done shedding, try feeding again.
- Inappropriate environment. Hognoses need just the right environment, primarily heat and humidity, for their bodily functions to work appropriately. Make sure you have the right temperatures on both the hot and cool side of the habitat and are maintaining the right humidity level. If these are off – especially if the heat is too low – your hognose may very well not eat. Heat that's too low slows the snake's digestive system.
- In brumation (or close to it). Another common time for hognoses to stop eating is during brumation. This can go for weeks to months, if you're doing it intentionally. Nothing to worry about; in the wild, they would be skipping most if not all meals during this time anyway, and since the cooler environment has slowed their metabolism, they're ready for it. Note that in cases for hogs that are not in active brumation, they may nonetheless still be responding to changes in the weather and preparing for brumation anyway. This is much less common for hatchlings and juveniles, but adults do seem to be more attuned to it.

Beyond these "normal" reasons that a hog may refuse to eat, we have the abnormal reason: illness. This is one you should definitely be concerned about. If your hognose is simply refusing to eat, but otherwise acting normal (and neither of the three aforementioned points apply), then you may want to consult the section below on feeding tips if they won't eat. However, if the snake's behavior or temperament has markedly changed, look for signs that something is wrong (check the Common Symptoms list below). If any of these are present, or especially if multiple are, take your hoggie to your local exotic vet immediately.

What Do I Do if My Hognose Won't Eat?

First, don't panic. Second, be patient. Next, read the section above. If you have successfully checked all of those boxes, then we come to the next step: assessing the situation.

Assuming you are fairly certain your hognose isn't ill, isn't in blue, isn't trying to go into brumation, and that your environment and setup is adequate and correct, try these steps (preferably in order).

1. Ask the breeder. While this should have already been on your list of questions to ask, be sure you ask how he/she has been feeding already. Are they tong-feeders, are they drop-feeders? And definitely verify that they are well established on f/t pinkies that are unscented. (more on this below). Even if you did ask the breeder and now your hognose has become a stubborn little jerk, it is still worth reaching back out to the breeder and asking them about it. How have they handled it before? What technique did they use?
2. Try a different feeding technique. As we mentioned previously, most of our hognoses are tong-fed, but we do have a few that refuse to take a mouse off the tongs. For these guys, we drop feed. This means we leave their cheeseboi on a plastic dish in their enclosure. It may be that your hognose is a shy eater (sometimes they're just a little self-conscious, y'know). Perhaps they need the thrill of the chase! Try dangling and wiggling the mouse in front of them if they are tong fed. Sometimes we have even gently booped a snoot with a mouse to get them interested. If you do drop feed, leave the mouse and the

snake alone for a bit. Check back after a few hours to see if it has been eaten, and if not, be sure to remove the mouse no more than 24 hours after drop. Nobody wants a rotting mouse.

3. Try a different size mouse but be conservative. Like most other reptiles, hognoses can be opportunistic; just because they are willing to keep eating, doesn't mean they should be. You should plan to "up size" your mouse when your hognose gets to the point that, a day after feeding, there is no visible "lump" anywhere on their body.
4. Try a different prey. Frozen/thawed mice are best for hognoses, both because of their nutritional value as well as their availability. But if your hog is going on a long-term hunger strike, you may need to branch out a little. Try ordering some Reptilinks and see if your snake will eat them. Maybe continue with them for a single feeding or two, and then try f/t mice again. Everyone likes variety, but there's a reason snakes do best on a rodent diet.
5. Scenting. Do this last, and only after you have worked through the other methods above first. The reason is because some snakes will become spoiled little brats. A hognose will typically stick to the food it has been established on. If scenting, the first thing you should try is to "brain" its mouse. That is, pierce its skull with a needle and squeeze with the tongs until a bit of brain juice begins to leak out. Yes, it's about as gross as it sounds. However, for some picky hogs out there, this alone is enough to make them interested in their meal. If it doesn't work, try using a bit of canned tuna or salmon in water; just dip the mouse in it. While some folks have successfully fed the salmon or tuna itself to their hogs, we have seen some develop neurological issues due to the deficiency in their diets. So once again, use them for a scent, not as a primary source of food.

Just be sure to remember the first step: don't panic. A multi-week hunger strike won't kill an otherwise healthy hognose. They can even go months without a meal, though if yours is approaching these numbers, try some of the things listed above.

Note: Do not feed live and wild-caught prey. These can carry parasites and can easily make your hognose sick.

Can I Co-Hab a Western Hognose?

About as successfully as you can cohab a Burmese python with a chihuahua. The simple answer is no, you cannot. Only during breeding should two hognoses be put together, and even then, only after the female has been fed, and their interactions monitored closely.

Hognose snakes are capable of eating other snakes, including other hogs. There are known and documented cases of a female eating the male she was supposed to be mating with, and this has been observed in the wild as well. Albeit, due to their small size, this is not frequent, it is nonetheless a distinct possibility. We have seen multiple cases from other breeders of a female attempting to eat a male during breeding season.

Additionally, a female may turn around and consume her own eggs after they have been laid. Brutal and dark, but part of nature. So once again: do not try to cohab western hognoses, and if you're working on breeding, be sure to remove the eggs as soon as she is done laying.

What are the Common Symptoms / Illnesses to Understand?

Symptoms of the more common illnesses include parasites, mites, respiratory infections, and mouth or scale rot. Below are some common symptoms typically observed for the most common medical issues that you could encounter (note: we do not claim to be veterinarians, and all information provided should be taken in such a light. **Always** confirm any suspicions of illness with your exotic vet!)

Parasites:

- Regurgitation
- Diarrhea
- Bloody excretions

Mites:

- Lethargic attitude
- Prolonged soaking in water dish / humid hide
- Tiny black dots around eyes, ears, or vent (private parts)

Respiratory infections:

- Lethargic attitude
- Bubbly saliva
- Rattle or raspy breathing
- Open-mouthed breathing (like prolonged or excessive yawning)

Mouth or scale rot:

- Swollen, inflamed area around mouth
- Pus coming from the mouth or nose
- Discolored scales, especially on the underbelly
- Blisters on the scales
- Raised scales

If you believe any of these issues are present with your hognose, check with your local exotic vet immediately.

Treatments vary, and most of these issues are easily treated if caught in time. Respiratory and parasitic infections typically need medicinal attention. For the former this will likely mean antibiotics, which have to be prescribed by a licensed vet. For parasites, your vet will most likely give them a dewormer.

Mite treatments can be administered at home if you're comfortable doing it (and know what you're doing), but if you're not, once again: be sure to check with your vet.

Western Hognose Quick Care Guide

Western Hognose snakes make great pets! They are active, quirky, and full of personality. With proper care and husbandry, western hognose snakes can live over 20 years in captivity. Hognose snakes don't get very big; adult males will typically max out under 24" long, and females only reach about 36".

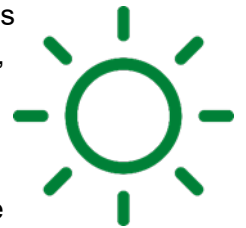
Enclosure

For a juvenile or hatchling – such as you will typically find at reptile expos – you won't need a whole lot of space. In fact, many hognose keepers find their snakes do better in small enclosures. For a juvenile, an 18x18x12 Exo Terra glass terrarium should work great. For an adult, especially for females (as they get notably larger), you'll want something a little bigger, like a 36x18x12 Exo Terra. You may also have success keeping them in a plastic Sterilite container but be sure to get something with a locking lid and provide enough air holes for proper ventilation.



Lighting & Heat

Hognose snakes – especially juveniles – can be kept with just belly heat. While hognose snakes do not technically require UVB, we at E. B. Exotics maintain that they do better with it. For heat, keep the hot side of their habitat at 90°-95°F with the cool side around 70°-75°F. For UVB, use a T5 and keep it at least 6" away from their basking spot. During the spring/summer months, best practice is to give them 12hrs of light and 12hrs of dark; during the fall/winter months, this should be 10hrs light and 14hrs of dark (unless they're in brumation, in which case it will naturally be dark more often).



Humidity

Western hognose snakes are native to dry environments, and because they dig and burrow a lot are susceptible to respiratory infections. Keep their humidity at 35%-60% for best health and wellness. (Note: the low side should be where their heat source is, with the higher end at the cool side of their enclosure)



Substrate (Bedding)

You'll want something that can hold its shape for tunnels, as hognoses are (as noted above) avid tunnel-builders. Aspen is typically the favorite choice here, given that it holds shape well and allows them to construct tunnels, yet is not scented or treated. Be sure to avoid anything scented or treated, as hognoses are sensitive to that. Shredded or shaved aspen works well. An alternative option for the more experienced reptile owner is to go BioActive. Check out Terra Sahara from **The Bio Dude** to get started with this.



Feeding

A juvenile hognose will eat a frozen/thawed pinky mouse about once a week (every 5-7 days). As they grow, check their "lump" size the day after they have eaten. If you no longer see the "lump" in their bellies the next day, it's probably time to take them up a size of mouse.



Links & Additional Info

Here's a list of links and additional information that we encourage you to check out.

E. B. Exotics

If you have any questions about how we raise our snakes, what our setup looks like, or to inquire about a purchase, feel free to check out our website ebexotics.com.

US|ARK

This is the United States Association of Reptile Keepers. USARK works hard to keep the reptile trade – for breeders, keepers, and enthusiasts alike – safe and fair. This includes making sure that uninformed bureaucrats don't take away your rights as a reptile owner. At E. B. Exotics, we wholeheartedly support USARK's mission. We are certified Bronze Supporters of USARK and encourage everyone to purchase a membership with them. To incentivize working together to keep our trade safe, we offer a special discount for our buyers who are USARK members. For any reptile we sell under \$600, we will give 10% off to any active USARK members. For reptiles that cost over \$600, we offer 5% off. Proving USARK membership is pretty easy: you can log into the USARK website and go to Memberships → Manage account → Subscriptions. Just show us a screenshot with your active membership and we'll apply the discount!



US|ARK

MorphMarket

We list (and sell) most of our snakes on MorphMarket. But not just us! There are lots of great sellers on MorphMarket, we and have made many purchases. Just be sure to check the feedback and reviews, and get all your questions answered, before you send any money. A good breeder will welcome questions, especially when it pertains to taking care of their critters!

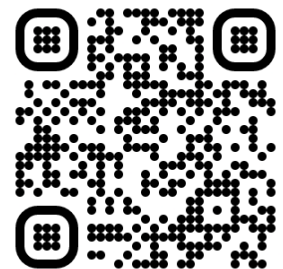


Morph Market

The Bio Dude

Josh Halter (aka 'The Dude') is one of the most prominent and well-known in the trade. Josh has been helping to make bio active habitats not just more popular, but also a better and healthier part of the reptile keeping trade.

Josh has built an incredible business and is one of the most knowledgeable in the industry when it comes to bio-active setups. At E. B. Exotics, we have all our breeder snakes set up in Bio Active habitats to give them the most natural-feeling environment that we can. Not only is it more enjoyable for the snake (at least, we think so, but have a hard time getting them to answer that question), it's also practical. Depending on your setup, your cleanup effort can be greatly reduced when you have a hardworking crew of springtails and isopods doing the dirty work! If you don't know what that means, then this is the perfect time to check out Josh's website and videos!



The Bio Dude

(Note: while we maintain active memberships with MorphMarket and US|ARK, E. B. Exotics is not directly affiliated with Josh Halter or The Bio Dude. We just respect the heck out of him!)