

BALL PYTHON CARE GUIDE DETAILED VERSION

HISTORY

Let's go back to where it all started, Africa. The ball python was discovered in the mid-1700s in Sub-Saharan Africa from the west coast of Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, and Ghana Eastwards towards Chad, Sudan, Cameroon, and Uganda up to the Nile River.

They were first imported into the pet trade in the U.S. from West Africa in the late 1970s. The first ball python morph produced in captivity was the albino ball python line created by Bob Clark in 1992.

These snakes are called ball pythons because of their defensive posture of coiling into a tight ball with their heads protected in the center of the coil. The name royal python is derived from many African rulers known to have worn live pythons as jewelry, and to this day, many still worship the ball python.

Ball Pythons have a life expectancy of 25 years in the wild, but in captivity, if properly cared for can live up to 40 years. The oldest snake documented in a zoo was a 47-year-old ball python at the Philadelphia Zoo.

The ball pythons were found in semi-tropical parts of Africa, rain forests, grasslands, and savannas, where they would spend most of their time during the day in underground burrows and become active at night. In Africa, it can sometimes go over 100 degrees during the day, and the ball pythons need to take cover underground from the heat. Recent studies have shown that inside a ball python's burrow, temperatures range from 78-92 degrees, and the humidity can be up to 95%!

Ball pythons can reach an adult length of 6 feet or more in some cases, but the average ball python usually is around 3-5 feet in length, and this all depends on their diet. A poor diet will result in a stunted ball python. (Can be caused by feeding too small of meals and or not frequently enough).

The ball python's wild diet in Africa consists of birds, Gambian pouched rats, black rats, rufous-nosed rats, shaggy rats, and striped grass mice. The "ASF" African soft-furred rat was not native to the parts of Africa where the ball pythons originated. The Gambian pouched rat is the world's largest rat reaching up to 9 pounds, and its average size is around 3 pounds. The black rat reached up to 250 grams in weight. The rufous-nosed rat can reach up to 36 inches long and weigh up to 7 pounds. The striped grass mouse reached up to 12 inches and weighed up to 80 grams. That goes to show that ball pythons can handle large meals, and one large meal vs. multiple tiny meals is a lot better for them.

Next, let's talk about the husbandry requirements in captivity

Heat: Ball pythons are nocturnal; in Africa, they stay underground inside rodent/small animal borrows or termite mounds where it's hot and humid. So, it's not necessary to give a ball python an overhead heating element. It's more beneficial to them if you provide them with belly heat by using a heating pad connected to a thermostat to regulate the correct temperature and placing the pad underneath the enclosure on one side to create a gradient from hot to warm. The temperature should be kept around 88-92 degrees for the hot spot. You will set your thermostat to this temperature, and by using a heat gun, you can adjust your temps to be more accurate. General air temperature should never exceed 95 degrees. It poses a serious risk to your snake and can lead to neurological issues. It is very important to use a thermostat on all heat sources. Avoid temperatures lower than 75 degrees, which can lead to respiratory infections and a freezing snake, as they are cold-blooded and cannot thermoregulate. You want the warm side to be around 85 degrees and the ambient temperature to be about 80 degrees. By using the heat gun, you should notice a gradient the farther away you get from the heating pad. Ball pythons do not need any "night light" just keep the heating pad the same temperature throughout the entire day and night! Heat is very important so your ball python can digest its food properly. You will need a temperature and humidity gauge to monitor your ball python's husbandry. The plastic ones at pet stores are expensive, worthless, and super inaccurate, and on top of that, the adhesive ones can get stuck on the snake and can/will rip the skin off. Walmart sells affordable gauges made for inside the house, and these can be used in the snake's enclosure to gauge your temp and humidity accurately! Never use the zoomed heating rock; it is dangerous, cannot regulate heat, and will cook your snake.

Lighting: As stated above, ball pythons do not need special lighting or uvb. The lights that your windows and house give off will be enough. Giving your ball python a light won't provide anything beneficial. Light fixtures and bulbs can be expensive; save your money! Ball pythons live in borrows and mounds for a reason; they love the hot, humid, and dark cave-like environment. Ball pythons feel very vulnerable outside their cave because of predators. Now, we know our pets are safe inside our homes, but the snake does not know this, so we must provide our pets with a similar environment mimicking the one in the wild. You will experience fewer escapes this way too!

Humidity: A super important topic that many people are uneducated about mostly due to the fact of wrong information being spread around by pet stores. Ball pythons are native to Africa, but they are **NOT** a desert species of snake! Ball pythons are semi-tropical; studies have shown that in Africa, the humidity inside the wild ball python borrows/mounds can be up to 95% and higher! In captivity, we found that keeping the humidity around 70-85% is an appropriate amount, and I stand by this and use this for all our ball pythons for many years, and ours are very healthy. The PROS to proper humidity; full solid sheds (no stressful baths needed), smooth, soft feel to the scales, that's hydration! Respiratory tracts will be hydrated, reduce sickness, and provide better comfort to the snake. 5 of 5 The CONS to poor humidity; dehydration, high risk of respiratory infection, stuck shed, wrinkly skin, high risk of illnesses. (They will look dry and wrinkly, with layers of stuck shed, rough to the touch).

Substrate: Another important step of creating/holding humidity for your ball python.

- For tubs/racks: paper towels, coconut husk products, cypress mulch/forest floor will work great since this type of enclosure is great for holding in humidity!
- For pvc enclosures: mixed substrate of organic topsoil, sphagnum moss, play sand, cypress mulch, coconut husk, or just coconut husk products, cypress mulch, and paper towels will work.
- For glass fish tanks: you will need a substrate that is resilient to mold and holds moisture, reptichip, baby chip, and other chunky thick coconut products will work! Cypress mulch/forest floor is not a bad option, but it can mold if you don't watch it, and it can dry out, so gentle misting will be needed. Or make your own blend of substrate! All blended together, organic topsoil, sphagnum moss, cypress mulch, and coconut husk make a great substrate! There are so many other substrates you can use, too many to list! As long as there are no toxins, it's organic and holds moisture; use it! (Paper towels for new pets going into quarantine is fine, but not for the long term as it doesn't hold humidity in glass tanks, add damp sphagnum moss for a boost of humidity).
- I recommend **NOT** using these as a substrate for ball pythons: Coconut fiber, fine, dusty dirt-like consistency products will not work trust me, you will make mud soup with it, and it dries out quickly. It also likes to wedge underneath the scales and heat pits on ball pythons, which can't be comfortable for them. Pine and cedar shavings are 100% no... They have toxic chemicals called aromatic hydrocarbons (phenols) and acids. Cedar is considered one of the most toxic woods for reptiles, please avoid it. If used, it can cause respiratory issues, which can be deadly if not treated, and many other issues. Please take the time to google this if you currently use cedar or pine. • Aspen Bedding: For anyone living in high-humidity climates such as Florida, aspen may work best for you, but if you live in dry climate areas, aspen is not a good substrate for ball pythons as it holds no moisture and molds when wet.

Inside the Enclosure: This is probably the most fun part of setting up an enclosure, and important! Bring out your creativity and go all out on your pet's home! Remember that the ball python is nocturnal and likes to be sneaky and stealthy. Provide your pet with as many hides/caves as it can fit inside the enclosure, and provide fake or live plants, vines, flowers, leaves, sticks, branches, and rocks. The goal is to have a busy or cluttered enclosure; a bare enclosure is not ideal and will result in a stressed-out snake, and a bare enclosure isn't aesthetically pleasing. Reptile decorations don't have to be expensive, instead of Petco or other pet stores, go to your dollar tree, hobby lobby, Amazon, Walmart, or thrift stores to find decorations! Give the item a hot wash with soapy water, and you can add it to your pet's home. You can also create your own custom backgrounds with pond and stone expanding foam! Your pet will be happy with a cluttered home and many places to slither through.

Enclosure Types: There is much controversy to using tub\rack systems, and not everyone finds them aesthetically pleasing, but when it comes to this certain species, the ball python, I highly recommend you give it a try. I have helped so many people with their ball pythons not wanting to eat, always stressed, striking a lot, etc. I have many people who can vouch for me after I helped them, they would never go back to glass fish tanks after this, and they even recommend others to use tubs/racks, PVC cages; why? Because they noticed a huge positive difference in their pet! Suppose you still prefer to use glass fish tanks. In that case, there are a few ways we can make it a little better for your pet, this will be included in the next category, but I defiantly recommend getting a different species that are more suited for glass fish tanks or try out a pvc cage, they are similar to a glass tank, but they hold in humidity better and are better insulated, they are aesthetically pleasing to look at and are a great second choice for ball pythons.

PROS to tub/racks: Holds humidity and heat in! It acts like a dark cave, how they like it in the wild, more spacious if you plan to get more snakes and a great disguise to hide that you have reptiles, it will look like an ordinary shelf to others, and snakes will feel way more secure and hidden, little to no escapes, very light and easy to keep clean.

PROS to PVC enclosures: Similar to a glass fish tank as it has a front opening or sliding doors, and instead of all four sides being glass, three sides are pvc which holds humidity and heat in and is well insulated. Light in weight makes it easier to move and clean, pleasing to look at, the snake will feel secure and hidden, with little to no escapes.

CONS to glass fish tanks: Does **NOT** hold in heat or humidity, glass gets cold, snake will feel very exposed and stressed, snakes often escape more in these, snake will nose rub and glass surface looking to get away, very heavy and can be a pain to clean, will get rough water marks on the glass when misting, doesn't have easy access and you can look like a predator (a birds claws) when grabbing your ball python out from the top.

HOW TO SET UP AN ENCLOSURE

Tub/Rack System Setup: Tubs can be purchased in-store at Walmart etc. Rack Systems can be DIY built or purchased online. Animal Plastics is a good website that sells them, and there are many other companies to choose from. For hatchlings, size 6qt-16qt tubs work best. For juveniles, size 28-32qt tubs work best. For adults' size, 41qt tubs work best. All can be bought at Walmart. Drill 5-8 holes on two sides of the tub, add a heating pad connected to a thermostat underneath one side of the tub, substrate, hides, and décor inside the tub, along with a water bowl. When purchasing the rack system online, it will need to be assembled when you receive it in the mail. Heat tape and predrilled holes are included already. Add your thermostat, substrate, décor, and water bowl, and you will all be set.

PVC Enclosure Setup: Can be DIY built or purchased online. Animal Plastics is a good website that sells them, and there are many other companies to choose from. When purchased online, it will need to be assembled when you receive it in the mail. Optionally, you can add a custom-built background with expanding foam, which can be turned into a bioactive setup with substrate, live plants, and springtails and isopods. PVC enclosures can be really fun to design and get creative with. Provide lots of clutter for your pet in these types of enclosures.

Glass Fish Tanks Setup: If I still couldn't convince you to try the tub/rack or pvc enclosure, let's make your glass fish tank more suitable for your ball python! It can be purchased at pet stores. First, the glass gets cold and has no insulation to keep your pet warm. Try blacking out three sides of the tank with nontoxic paint or sticking dark-colored construction paper or a printed background theme, or a custom build DIY background with expanding foam, this will make it more pleasing to look at, and the snake will feel a little more secure in its home, this should add a tiny bit of insulation, but not enough if your room stays cold. There are not a whole lot of options to insulate the glass. Second, the screen lid- it airs out the tank a lot, taking out the heat and humidity that the snake needs, grab a roll of aluminum foil tape from Walmart or a hardware store and tape the entire screen lid (the whole lid) next grab a pin and depending on 5 of 5 the size of your tank poke a few air holes through the aluminum foil tape. For example, give a 10-gallon tank with about 10-15 tiny holes. (Too many holes will defeat the whole purpose) by doing this, it will trap in the heat and humidity. Thirdly, to achieve 70-85% humidity in glass fish tanks, you will need a substrate that is resilient to mold and holds moisture (See page 3 for substrate options). Lastly, ball pythons are ambush predators, and they like to stay hidden and wait to attack a rodent passing by, providing them with enough hides/caves, plants, and branches to hide under so they feel stealthy and sneaky. Your pet will be much happier! Giving your ball python only one hide/cave with no other hiding spots makes the tank very bare and open, this is not ideal for this species and is the number one cause of your ball python not eating.

Diet: Let's talk about what your ball pythons diet should look like and explain a little more about how the ball pythons digestive system works.

The ball python digestive system was designed to handle one proper-sized meal every seven days vs. multiple small meals at once. Just because the ball python can eat multiple small meals at once doesn't mean it should, you can risk regurgitation by that feeding method. Every species is different! What is stated here is for ball pythons.

In the wild, they will try to eat what they can to survive. In captivity, we can offer them a well-balanced diet to keep them healthy and away from fatty liver disease or malnourishment. It's great that every creature gets a varied diet for proper nutrition, we recommend that any age ball python, from a 1-month-old hatchling at 60 grams or less to a full-grown adult at 4,000+ grams, eat a main diet of rats. Why? Because rats come in all sizes that mice cannot offer. Rats can start as little as a 2-gram baby pinky and grow up to 900+ grams in weight. Mice max out at 50 grams, will not grow much bigger than that and don't provide nearly enough nutrition or fat to your ball python as a main diet.

Feeding your ball python mice for its entire life will severely slow down the snake's growth and even can stunt the growth, and it won't reach its potential size, and feeding multiple meals is rough on their digestive systems, which is another form of malnourishment. I have evidence and proof that this is a fact. However, if you are giving your ball python a varied diet of mice and an appropriate-sized rat, that is perfectly fine! Mice should not be a main staple. Also, if you start your ball python on mice first it can be very hard to transition over to rats in most cases. As for a varied diet, they can occasionally eat chickens, African soft-furred rats, and other small rodents.

Let's talk about what is considered an appropriate-sized rat. It would be best if you never fed your ball python too large of meals or too small of meals, going by the ball python's head size is **not** how you determined the size of their prey, but actually going by the size of the ball python's thickest part of the body is the correct way to determine their size of prey. A rat should be the same size or slightly bigger than the biggest part of the snake's body, this is the correct way of feeding a ball python and will provide your snake with proper nutrition and will grow up to its potential size and weight of a healthy snake.

Body Condition: What to look for to visually tell if your ball python is underweight, at an ideal weight, or obese.

Underweight signs- by seeing or feeling the vertebrae(spine) and ribs, lose skin, triangular body shape, sunken eye sockets, hollow belly. Depending on the situation, feed an appropriate-sized rat every five days, as stated in the diet category. Dust the rat in multivitamin powder supplements and add electrolyte in water to get more nutrition into the snake.

Idea weight signs- can't see or feel the vertebrae, the muscle will be level with the spine, have a natural round shape. Feed one appropriately sized rat every seven days.

Obese signs- the muscle/fat will be above the spine area, fatty bulge before tail (don't mistake for a passing stool) or comparatively thick neck, the head will look smaller, fat rolls, scale spread (doesn't count for gravid females). Depending on the situation, feed a smaller-sized rat every 14 days until the snake is at its ideal weight, then feed every seven days.

Ball Python Age and Weights: There is not a guaranteed way of knowing the age of your ball python without knowing the hatch date from the breeder it was produced by. If purchased from a pet shop, there is no way of knowing for certain. We can follow some guidelines that can help us determine an age for your ball python, but that isn't guaranteed either as all snakes grow at different rates depending on if they were fed a proper or poor diet.

WEIGHT GUIDE

Newly Hatched Ball Pythons: range from 40-100 grams in weight.

Baby Ball Pythons: range from 100-300 grams in weight.

Juvenile Ball Pythons: range from 400-700 grams in weight.

Sub-Adult Ball Pythons: range from 800-1400 grams in weight.

Adult Ball Pythons: range from 1500-4000+ grams in weight.