



Portsmouth Reptile & Amphibian Society
P.O Box 16
Portsmouth
PO2 9BW

P.R.A.S Care sheet No. 7



Species Common Name: **Aesculapian Snake**

Scientific Name: *Zamenis longissima*

Care Difficulty: Moderate

Distribution: Southern and Central Europe

Description:

The Aesculapian snake is one of only four species of European rat snakes. It has been suggested that its widespread distribution throughout Southern and Central Europe is due in part to the keeping of this snake in Roman temples during the Roman occupation of Europe. Escaped Aesculapian snakes are thought to have become established in the vicinity of temples of Aesculapius - the Greek god of healing. The coat of arms of the British Medical Association is of Aesculapius holding a staff, around which is entwined an Aesculapian snake, for this reason. It is however equally likely that that this species once had a larger range which has contracted in recent decades due to habitat loss and human interference. There is little differentiation of the head from the body. Colour is olive-brown, yellowish or greyish-brown, with a pattern less white to yellow belly. Along the flanks are whitish flecks and there is a yellowish collar behind the head reminiscent of the Grass snake. Indeed it is easy to confuse young Aesculapian snakes for grass snakes. This collar generally becomes less distinct with age and adults are readily identified. The overall appearance is subtly understated and it is only on close examination that the attractiveness of this snake can be appreciated.

This snake is the most arboreal of the European snakes and although slender it has amazing strength and climbing skills being able to grip a branch (or your arm) almost to the point of being undetachable. Temperament as with many snakes varies but this snake is best described as lively with a tendency to nip if startled. If handled considerably however Aesculapians are generally quite calm and will for example cling onto your arm whilst you are cleaning their vivarium out. They are also quick to escape if given the opportunity!

Size:

The Aesculapian snake is a long slender snake that usually grows to about 140cm in length but can grow up to 2 metres (6.5') in length and rarely to 2.25 metres (7.4').

Housing:

Care is not dissimilar to that of the corn snake with a daytime temperature range of 22-28°C (72-82°F) being required and around 20°C (68°F) at night. In view of its arboreal nature a forked climbing branch is required and the vivarium should be tall enough to accommodate this. A substrate of beech chippings or newspaper is suitable and a hide should be provided both at the warm and cool ends of the vivarium to enable the snake to choose the temperature range that suits them best. Bottom heat in the form of a heat mat can be used for basking as well a top-situated spotlight at one end.

Bulbs should always be fitted with guards to prevent your snake from burning itself.

A large water bowl should be provided as this snake likes to soak, particularly before a shed, but if used too frequently can cause blisters to appear on the ventral scales, so the snake's habits should be monitored and a smaller bowl substituted if necessary to discourage excessive soaking. If not due to shed suspect that either the 'viv' is too hot or the possibility of a mite infestation should be considered.

Diet and Feeding:

Food consists of suitably sized mice - de-frosted rodents should be warmed to body temperature before being offered - and in view of the slim build of this snake I recommend that mice no bigger than the snake's head-width be offered. Aesculapians are normally good feeders and should be fed weekly, although males in particular may go through a summer fast, resuming feeding in the autumn when they should be fed heavily to build up reserves for hibernation.

Breeding:

A hibernation period of three to four months below 12°C (54°F) is necessary to induce reproduction. The sexes should be kept separate for several weeks after bringing them out of hibernation and then introduced for several days at a time. Mating takes place about 30 days post-hibernation and about 30 days later 5-12 eggs (rarely up to 18) are laid and these should be incubated at a temperature of 28°C (82°F). Hatching takes place about 50 days later and the hatchlings measure about 12cm (5") long. On a diet of mice they can achieve sexual maturity in two to three years. As a captive subject the Aesculapian snake is a fascinating animal and it is a shame that they are not often available. Fortunately more people are now keeping and breeding them and captive-bred hatchlings are the best choice being both infection-free and adapted to captive conditions. Some hatchlings require a short cooling period of about a month at about 15°C (60°F) to induce them to start feeding - they are born with enough yolk inside them to hibernate in the wild without feeding and this is what they may try to do in captivity.

If your hatchling still refuses to feed one month after it's first shed you can try 'tease-feeding'. This is a method where you gently but firmly hold your hatchling in one hand

with the head and neck free. In the other hand you hold a mouse-pinkie, which you wave in front of the snake and push the nose of the pinkie towards the snake's mouth whereupon it will usually try to bite the pinkie. If it does it may hold onto it and start to chew on it. If it spits it out you get it to strike again and so on, until it holds on and proceeds to swallow the pinkie. You can gently put the snake down - and remain motionless until the snake spits it out (start again!) or swallows it. Once the snake has completely swallowed the pinkie you can put it back in its container. The success of this method relies on great patience and being gentle with the snake. You can always try again tomorrow! Under no circumstances should you try to ram the pinkie down the snake's throat (a method known as 'force-feeding') as the stress of the procedure may kill the snake.

Once the snake becomes accustomed to a regular meal it will usually start to feed of its own accord and will then be easy to cater for.

If after several weeks of attempting to tease-feed your snake still will not feed you should place its cage in a dark room at a temperature of 15°C (60°F) or a little less. Water should be available at all times and this should be renewed at least once a week. After about one month to six weeks return the cage to its heated condition and offer food every 3-4 days when the snake should start to feed of its own accord.

References:

A Field guide to the reptiles and amphibians of Europe, E.N.Arnold, J.A.Burton and D.W.Ovenden. Collins London 1980

Mammals, Reptiles and Amphibians of Britain and Europe, Paul Morrison. Macmillan. London 1994

Monograph of the Colubrid snakes of the genus Elaphe, Fitzinger. Klaus-dieter Schulz. Koelz Scientific Books. Kavlickuv Brod 1996

The Snakes of Europe, J.W.Steward. David and Charles. Newton Abbott 1971