



Portsmouth Reptile & Amphibian Society
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P.R.A.S Care sheet No 1



Common Name: **Corn Snake or Red Rat Snake**

Scientific Name: *Pantherophis guttatus*

Care Difficulty:

Corn Snakes are regarded as one of the best snakes for beginners, due to its size, temperament and ease of care. They tend to be very docile; Corn Snakes are one of the best snakes to purchase if you want a pet you can handle.

Distribution:

Corn snakes cover a large range in the South-eastern United States. They are found as far north as Maryland and New Jersey, but are mostly found from North Carolina all the way to the south in the Florida Keys, and west to the Mississippi.

Description:

Corn snakes are slender snakes with long tails, and a cross section of their body is a similar shape to that of a loaf of bread.

The colouration of wild corn snakes is generally an orange background with reddish saddles along its back. The head normally has a spear tip like shape in the same reddish colour as the saddles, although can be slightly lighter. Their eye colour is generally orange, and they have round pupils.

The underbellies of wild type corn snakes have black splodges against a white background, which can have a slightly chequered effect. This is said to resemble Indian corn, which is one of the supposed reasons for its common name.

However, the colours of corn snakes are highly variable over its native range, and in captivity there are literally hundreds of different colour and pattern combinations. The most common variations are the Amelanistic, (albino) and the Anerythristic (Black albino). Corn Snakes are active, nocturnal and diurnal snakes, which frequent a variety of habitats and often found in or around human dwellings.

Size:

As a hatchling, Corn Snakes normally measure 20-28cm. Typical individuals range from 1-1 ½ metres (3.5'-5'). The largest recorded size for a Corn Snake is just less than 2 metres long.

Housing:

Hatchlings can be reared in ventilated tubs, an adult will have ample space in a vivarium 75x50x50cm (30"x20"x20"), although a larger space will definitely be appreciated by your animal. Corn snakes can be housed together however if you are considering breeding then greater success is normally experienced if the animals are kept separate prior to their mating. Corn snakes can be described as the Houdini of the snake world so as for snakes, in general, so be absolutely certain that the cage is escape-proof.

The choice of Substrate for a Corn Snake is often dependent on your own preference. Bark chippings (never Cedar as these are toxic to your snake), wood shavings, newspaper and paper towels are the most common, and are all easy to maintain. For hygiene reasons remove waste matter as soon as practical as this will ensure that bacterial and fungal growth is kept to a minimum, and that no unpleasant odours come from your vivarium. The entire substrate should be replaced every month or so, and the vivarium cleaned with disinfectant suitable for use with reptiles.

The Vivarium should be heated with a hot spot at one end of 25-30°C (80-90°F). The heat source should be positioned at the extreme end of the cage, allowing for a thermal gradient between the two ends. This should be running on an appropriate thermostat to prevent overheating.

All bulbs and heaters should be protected with a guard to stop your corn snake from coming into direct contact with them and burning itself.

Hide boxes on both the warm and cool sides should be available to allow your Corn Snakes to hide away and climbing branches, although not necessary, will be appreciated. Artificial and UV light is not required although basking lights can be effective, as long as the enclosure does not overheat. At night, the temperature can be allowed to drop but should not go below 18°C (65°F). Humidity is not a critical keeping factor except for when the snake is in shed. At that time a very light misting once a day or every other day will promote a clean, healthy shed. Provide clean water at all times. The water bowl should be heavy to stop it tipping over and large enough for the snake to soak in. Corn Snakes do not soak frequently but they will do so on occasion, especially during a shed or on very hot days.

Diet and Feeding:

In the wild Corn Snakes take a variety of prey including most small mammals, lizards, and birds. In captivity, they almost always accept defrosted mice and rats without a problem. If you are new to the hobby we suggest that you purchase an animal with an established feeding regime. Hatchlings should be fed every 4-6 days, and adults no more than once every 7-10 days. The width of the prey item should not exceed 1 ½ times the width of the snakes' head. Watch out for your snakes weight as the backbone and skeletal frame should not be readily visible, but the scales should not be distended and showing the skin between them either. If you over-feed your animal it will become obese and associated health problems may follow. Because of their slow metabolism an

overweight snake will take a very long time to lose its excess fat

Breeding:

Most Rat snakes will not breed unless a cooling period is provided. The snakes should be cooled to 8-10°C (46-50°F) for about 2-3 months usually in November or December. This temperature should be reached gradually to reduce thermal shock. Only healthy snakes should be cooled and used for breeding. Prior to cooling the snake must be fasted for up to one month to allow the passage of food through the snakes' body (any food left in the gut will rot and can kill your snake). In the spring, usually late February or March, the temperature of the snakes should gradually be raised and feeding can commence. After several good feeds the snakes can be paired. Mating is more successful if the female has just sloughed. Copulation can take continue from 10 minutes to several hours and may be repeated several times. After you have observed the animals mating, part them and try again after a few days, to make sure.

If mating has been successful, the female will normally stop eating after a couple of weeks. She will be ready to lay her eggs in approximately 60 days. Between 10- 15 days prior to laying the female will undergo a pre-laying slough. At this point a nest box should be placed in the vivarium. A plastic container such as an ice cream tub lined with damp sphagnum moss will suffice. The female can spend several days in the box prior to laying. Once the eggs have been laid they should be removed as soon as possible to a plastic box with a substrate of moist vermiculite. The humidity should be maintained at 100% and kept at a constant temperature around 25°C (80°F). The average number of eggs laid is between 10 and 20; they are about 42-50mm long, 20- 22mm diameter. There is no need to separate the eggs, and unlike birds eggs they must not be turned. The eggs are normally ivory white do not worry if they discolour slightly, however if they appear to collapse and go mouldy they should, if possible, be removed to avoid infecting the other eggs.

When the juveniles arrive they should be placed into separate containers. They should slough after about 7 days and will then accept food. Sexual maturity can be reached at 2.5 years.

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