

BOA CONSTRICTOR CARE GUIDE

Boa constrictor imperator • Boa constrictor constrictor

Bay Area Bird & Exotics Hospital

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Boa constrictors are docile, long-lived, and manageable — when you plan for what they actually become. These snakes start small and end up 6–11 feet long, weighing up to 60 pounds, with a lifespan of 20–30+ years. Many commonly seen conditions are the direct result of inadequate housing or nutrition and are entirely preventable.



VITAL STATISTICS

Stat	Detail
Adult body length	6–11 feet (1.8–3.4 m) — varies by subspecies and sex
Adult body weight	20–60 lbs (9–27 kg) — varies by age, sex, and subspecies
Age of sexual maturity	18 months to 3 years (depending on sex)
Longevity	20–30+ years
Native range	Mexico through Central and South America; some Caribbean islands
Covered subspecies	Colombian boa (B.c. imperator) and Red-tailed boa (B.c. constrictor)



WHAT TO EXPECT FROM YOUR BOA CONSTRICTOR

- Boa constrictors are docile and tolerate handling well — but they do not respond to owners the way dogs or cats do and generally prefer to be left alone
- These snakes start off small but grow into large animals requiring custom enclosures — be prepared for a 20–30+ year commitment to a large, heavy snake
- When frightened, boas usually retreat if able — but they can strike or bite if provoked. Calm, predictable handling prevents most incidents.
- Dietary supplements are not needed — a properly fed boa on appropriately sized rodents receives complete nutrition without supplementation



HOUSING & SUBSTRATE

- **House individually** — boa constrictors are not social animals and cohabitation causes significant stress
- Enclosure must be escape-proof and appropriately sized — avoid any cage furniture or tape that could trap or injure the snake

- Minimum enclosure length = 75% of the snake's body length (the snake should be able to lay more than 2/3 of its body straight)
- Boas have a **fast growth rate** — expect to upgrade the enclosure multiple times. Invest in a custom enclosure suitable for an adult from the start.
- Provide a dark, secure hide box at both the warm end and the cool end — the snake should never have to choose between warmth and security
- Water bowl must be large enough for the entire snake to coil in

Life Stage	Minimum Enclosure Size
Juvenile	20-gallon long tank or 30" × 12" × 12" (75 × 30 × 30 cm)
Adult (male or smaller female)	48" × 24" × 24" (120 × 60 × 60 cm)
Adult female (full size)	72" × 24" × 24" (180 × 60 × 60 cm)

Substrate options:

- Non-particulate (preferred): reptile carpet, indoor/outdoor carpet, paper towels, newspaper — easy to clean and replace
- Particulate: reptile bark, reptile dirt mixtures — spot clean with every elimination, replace completely at least monthly
- Bioactive substrates are complex to establish — consult your veterinarian before setting one up
- Avoid cedar, corncob, wood chips or shavings, gravel, and rocks



TEMPERATURE & HUMIDITY

Zone	Temperature
Ambient / warm side	~85°F (29°C)
Basking hot spot	90–92°F (32–33°C)
Cool side minimum (daytime)	80°F (27°C) — never drop below this
Nighttime	~78°F (25°C) — a slight drop is acceptable but not required
Humidity	60–80%

- Use a thermostat or rheostat for all heat sources — essential for heat tape and radiant heat panels, strongly advised for all others
- If using a heat bulb or ceramic heat emitter, position it **above the enclosure lid** so the snake cannot come into direct contact with it
- Cold snakes will coil around heat sources — this causes severe thermal burns. **Never allow direct contact** with any heating element.
- A humid hide (filled with moistened sphagnum moss or paper towels) provides a focal area of higher humidity — change contents every 1–2 weeks to prevent mold
- Humidifiers and misting can be used to reach and maintain appropriate humidity



LIGHTING

- Provide UV lighting for **12–14 hours daily** to mimic natural daylight — use a timer for consistency

- UVB is not critical for boa constrictors but may support calcium metabolism — UVA promotes natural behaviors and is recommended
- Consistent light cycling supports normal behavior patterns and overall wellbeing



FEEDING

- Feed in the evening in a secured container separate from the snake's enclosure — this mimics natural feeding behavior and reduces the risk of the snake associating hands with food
- **Avoid feeding live prey** whenever possible — live rodents can bite and cause significant injury. Boas readily accept frozen/thawed prey.
- If live feeding is unavoidable, never leave the feeder animal unattended — remove it if the snake does not strike within 15 minutes
- Prey size guideline: no wider than the widest part of the snake's body

Size / Age	Frequency	Prey Item
Juvenile	Once weekly	Hopper mice or small mice
~3 feet (1 m)	Once weekly	Small rats
~5–6 feet (1.5–2 m)	Once weekly	Large rats
Very large adult	Once weekly	Jumbo rats or small rabbits
Adult (fully grown)	Every 2 weeks	Appropriately sized rodents



WATER

- Provide a bowl large enough for the snake to coil its entire body into — used for drinking and soaking
- Change water whenever soiled and **at least weekly** — snakes frequently defecate in their water bowls



COMMON MEDICAL CONDITIONS

Condition	Notes
Intestinal parasites	Fecal testing at every vet visit — common in wild-caught animals
Respiratory disease	Often linked to low temperatures or inadequate humidity
Stomatitis (oral infection / mouth rot)	Requires prompt veterinary treatment
Dysecdysis (retained shed / retained spectacles)	Usually a humidity problem — provide a humid hide during shed
Mites and ticks	Treat both the snake and the entire enclosure
Cloacal prolapse	Veterinary emergency
Thermal wounds	Result of direct contact with unguarded heating elements — entirely preventable
Skin infections	Often secondary to damp substrate or poor hygiene

Bite wounds from live prey	Feed pre-killed or frozen/thawed prey to prevent injury
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GETTING STARTED RIGHT

- Take your new boa to an experienced reptile veterinarian for a health exam and parasite testing — do this before problems develop, not after
- Leave a newly purchased boa alone in its enclosure for **1–2 weeks** to acclimate before handling regularly
- Interact during evening hours when the snake is most naturally active
- Use a pillowcase or a locking, ventilated plastic container that comfortably accommodates the snake's size for transport

Most reptiles, including boa constrictors, carry *Salmonella* bacteria without appearing ill. Always wash hands thoroughly after handling your snake or anything in its enclosure. Boa constrictors are not recommended for households with very young children or immunocompromised individuals.

Questions? We've heard weirder ones. Call us.

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