

CORN SNAKE CARE GUIDE

Pantherophis guttatus — Red Rat Snake

Bay Area Bird & Exotics Hospital

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Corn snakes are one of the best beginner snakes in captivity — non-venomous, calm, easy to handle, and genuinely hardy when their basic needs are met. They are also accomplished escape artists who will find every gap in an enclosure lid. Plan accordingly.

🔍 VITAL STATISTICS

Stat	Detail
Adult body length	3–6 feet (91–183 cm)
Age of sexual maturity	18–24 months
Maximum lifespan	10–20+ years (12–15 average)
Native range	Southeast USA — New Jersey to Florida Keys, as far west as Texas
Activity pattern	Crepuscular and nocturnal — most active at dawn, dusk, and night
Habitat	Pine forests, rocky outcrops, farmland — primarily ground-dwelling, some semi-arboreal

🔍 WHAT TO EXPECT FROM YOUR CORN SNAKE

- Corn snakes do not respond to their owners the way dogs and cats do — they spend much of their time coiled in hiding spots and prefer to be left to their own agenda
- Most are calm, docile, and placid — they thrive in captivity and are genuinely one of the easier snakes to keep
- They tend to pick a direction and go when handled — support the body fully and gently guide the head rather than restraining
- Minimal restraint is recommended — corn snakes are normally very docile and excessive handling causes unnecessary stress

Sexing:

- Females have a tail that tapers off quickly behind the vent; males have a longer, thicker tail that tapers slowly — a reptile veterinarian may be able to probe your snake for definitive sexing

🔍 HOUSING

- Minimum enclosure: 20-gallon tank with a secure lid — corn snakes are accomplished escape artists and will exploit any gap
- As the snake grows, more space should be provided — minimum enclosure length is 2/3 of the snake's body length
- They are solitary animals and should be housed alone in captivity
- Hiding places are essential — corn snakes become stressed if they cannot hide. Provide a hide (half log, PVC pipes, half flower pots...) at each end of the enclosure so the snake does not have to choose between warmth and security.
- Include a branch for climbing and resting — they are semi-arboreal and will use it

Safe substrate options:

- Newspaper, reptile carpet, or paper towels — easy to clean and replace
- Cypress mulch and aspen shavings allow your snake to burrow and support humidity — these require agitation and changing every 7-14 days
- Avoid cedar, corncob, wood chips or shavings, gravel, dirt, sand and rocks. Respiratory irritation or impactions aren't fun for either you or your snake.
- Avoid potentially toxic live plants

TEMPERATURE, LIGHTING & HUMIDITY

Zone	Temperature
Ambient gradient	70–85°F (21–29°C)
Basking area	88–90°F (27–32°C)
Nighttime	Can fall to the lower end of the gradient
Humidity	30–50% (normal household) — may need to increase if shedding is difficult

- Monitor temperatures with digital thermometers (thermostats to automatically adjust the heating elements are your friend!)
- Monitor humidity with digital hygrometers
- Provide heat via reptile heating pads or incandescent bulbs in reflector hoods — positioned to avoid direct contact with the snake
- Provide a humid hide by filling one of the hides with moist sphagnum moss (change periodically or you may grow fungus!).
- Never use hot rocks — they cause serious burns
- UVB — recent studies show that corn snakes can use UVB light to form Vitamin D (we get ours from the same process...unless you don't go outside much, then you have to drink your milk with Vit D added!)
- We recommend using a 5% UVB light for 10-12 hours a day (Arcadia and Zoo Med are 2 good brands).
- Change it according to manufacturer recommendations. Just because you can see the light...doesn't mean the UV is there. Check out our UV handout for more details.
- Get an appliance timer so you can enjoy an evening out without forcing your snake to endure a "land of midnight sun"

WATER

- Provide a bowl large enough for the snake to submerge its whole body — this is used for soaking as well as drinking
- For juvenile animals, keep water depth to approximately 1 inch (2.54 cm) — deep bowls are a drowning risk for small snakes
- Snakes frequently defecate in their water bowls — clean, disinfect, and change water **at least weekly**, and whenever visibly soiled
- Corn snakes need water daily but most will drink without being observed — don't assume a full bowl means the snake isn't drinking

FEEDING

- Feed at night in a secure container separate from the snake's home enclosure — this reduces the risk of the snake associating hands with food
- **Never leave a live rodent unattended** with any snake — live prey can and will injure your snake
- Most corn snakes will readily accept frozen/thawed rodents — this is the preferred method over live prey
- As a general guideline, feed after the snake has defecated — feeding while digesting can cause regurgitation

Age / Size	Feeding Frequency	Prey Item
Hatchling	Every 5–7 days	Pinkie mice (1–2 days old) → fuzzies → hoppers
Juvenile	Every 5–7 days	Small adult mice
Adult	Every 7–10 days	Adult mice — appropriately sized to snake girth

COMMON MEDICAL CONDITIONS

Condition	Notes
Intestinal parasites	Fecal testing at every vet visit — common in wild-caught animals
Dysecdysis (retained shed / retained eye spectacles)	Usually a humidity problem — provide a humidity box during shed
Respiratory infections	Often linked to incorrect temperatures or humidity
Stomatitis (mouth rot)	Infection requiring prompt veterinary treatment
Cloacal prolapse	Veterinary emergency — do not delay
Constipation / obstipation	Linked to dehydration, low temperatures, or inappropriate prey size
Dystocia / retained eggs	Reproductive emergency in females
External parasites (mites and ticks)	Treat both the snake and the enclosure

Cryptosporidiosis	Serious intestinal infection — requires veterinary diagnosis and management
Bite wounds from prey	Always feed pre-killed or frozen/thawed prey to prevent injury
Scale rot (skin problems)	Often secondary to damp or unsanitary substrate
Trauma / burns	From hot rocks, heating elements, or free roaming unsupervised
Inappetance	Common cause for concern — warrants veterinary evaluation if prolonged

📖 GETTING STARTED RIGHT

- Buy from a reputable breeder — a young, captive-bred corn snake is less stressed and far more willing to eat than a wild-caught animal
- Take your new snake to a reptile veterinarian for a health exam and parasite test before it settles in — not after problems appear
- Leave a newly purchased snake alone in its enclosure for 1–2 weeks to acclimate — resist the urge to handle immediately
- Interact during evening hours when the snake is naturally active
- Use a pillowcase or locking Tupperware container with ventilation holes for transport on short trips

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

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

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