



**CONCISE CARE SHEETS**

find more caresheets at [nwzoo.com/care](http://nwzoo.com/care)

**R E D - T A I L B O A S**  
**B O A C O N S T R I C T O R S**

**INTRO**

There are a variety of boas that are referred to as “red-tail” boas. The most common boa constrictor kept as pets for the past several decades is the Colombian boa constrictor and many pet stores marketed them as “Red-tail Boas”. Then a few races from northeastern South America became bred in private collections, and these large boas from places like Suriname and Peru had very distinctive, wonderful red to mahogany “tails” were known as “true red-tails”, a name that intended to distinguish them from their more common, and perhaps less intensely marked, cousin. Today, there are many color morphs that are selectively bred and the geographical bias has lessened. Many of the most desirable boa constrictors produced in captivity now certainly originate with the original pet trade “Colombian” stock and many also have Central American races (often known as *Boa imperator*) in their bloodline.

Boa constrictors range from Mexico to South America and also occur on neighboring neotropical islands. The South American forms (*Boa constrictor*) are usually largest. While historical reports of boas as long as eighteen feet exist, today any boa of twelve feet must be considered a monster. In general, the boas bred in herpetoculture attain a maximum of eight feet for males (with many males closer to six) and ten feet for females (with an average breeder being about eight feet long). Smaller races, like the one from Hog Island, are even smaller and when they are used in breeding projects the adult length rarely exceeds six feet for both genders. Other island and northern forms may be smaller still.

**GENERAL CARE & FEEDING**

Boa constrictors are tropical snakes that require heat and humidity. These topics will be covered in the following **HOUSING** section. Baby boas usually will start feeding on weanling mice or rat pups and usually can be converted to feeding on thawed-from-frozen rodents without difficulty. Rats are healthier prey items than mice and result in better growth, so rats of suitable size are preferred. Young snakes can be fed once a week or as often as every five days, with food offering suspended during a shed and resumed a couple of days after the snake sloughs its skin. Older snakes

**HOUSING**

A baby boa may be raised in a plastic shoe or sweater box or a ten gallon tank or similarly-sized terrarium, but they will grow quickly and larger enclosures should be planned for. An adult boa may require an enclosure with eight square feet or more of floor space. When raising young boas it should also be noted that a ten gallon aquarium is not a good enclosure. It loses far too much heat and humidity out of the screen lid. Sweater boxes that have been ventilated with air holes and reptile heat mats combine to make a better habitat for a young boa (see following section for more housing tips for baby boa constrictors).

The options for housing are far too many to be covered in a care sheet. Breeders use rack systems with molded ABS plastic drawers to house large collections, whereas pet keepers will find an increasing variety of injected molded or custom-crafter reptile cages on the market. Although rack systems don't give snakes the opportunity to climb, the pet owner may very well desire to permit his or her boa to exhibit its natural semi-arboreal habits. Boa constrictors are capable climbers and will appreciate sturdy climbing perches made from tree branches.

A general rule of thumb for boa enclosure size is that the cage should allow the snake to fully coil in its warmer basking spot and still have 75% of the cage's floor space at the ideal temperature of 85°F. A 2 x 4 ft cage that is 18-24 inches tall is often used for adult males and small females, but a very large female may require a 2 X 6' enclosure that is 24 inches or, preferably 3ft, high.

The two most important factors in a boa enclosure are being able to provide the correct heat and associated thermal gradient, and security. A boa is a strong and agile snake and, as mentioned, a powerful climber. A boa enclosure must be strong and secure. The ideal ambient temperature is 84-85°F both day and night, but a basking spot that offers 95-100°F is important, as is a slightly cooler end of the cage where it is perhaps 80-82°F. Digital thermometers will help ensure the correct heat gradient is used, but the keeper is always advised to pay attention to snake behavior. For example, if your boa is constantly beneath the basking spot it might

**QUICK TIPS**

- » Ambient air temperature in a boa enclosure should be maintained at 85°F, but a basking spot that is 95-100°F and a cooler corner closer to 80°F should be provided.
- » Requires fresh, humid air.
- » Capable climbers, boas enjoy some vertical space and climbing perches.

not be warm enough there and very likely is not warm enough elsewhere in the enclosure. In an ideal boa enclosure the snake will spend nearly equal time in each of the three temperature areas (cooler, normal, basking). If hideboxes are used it is best to have more than one so the snake doesn't choose security, seclusion and darkness over ideal temperature.

**HUMIDITY**

Boa constrictors are tropical snakes and live in jungles where there is both standing water and moisture in the air. FRESH, HUMID AIR is essential for respiratory health in boas. Humidity should be maintained in the 60-80% range at all times. Occasionally it go higher and many keepers elevate it during a boa's shed cycle, but it should never go below 60%. Dry air can result in respiratory infections. It may be advisable to run a humidifier in a room where a boa is housed when ambient humidity is low and, in fact, boa breeders tend to employ humidification systems in their snake rooms.

**HOUSING YOUNG BOAS**

If you wish to use a ten gallon aquarium you will have to make your own lid that doesn't let so much heat and moisture escape. Humidity can be better maintained if you cut a piece of pegboard to fit the top opening. But, better still, are plastic storage containers such as those made by Sterilite™ or Rubbermaid™. Until it is six months of age or so, a baby boa can be kept in a 12-quart Rubbermaid box. The 28-quart “sweater box” is a better choice from six months of age until the snake reaches three feet in length. These boxes should be heated from below by a reptile heat mat or Flexwatt heat tape covering no more than 1/4 of the floor. For both fire safety and snake safety, any heat device should be controlled by a rheostat or thermostat and some air space should be provided beneath the enclosure. TEST THE SET-UP FOR A FEW DAYS BEFORE HOUSING A LIVE SNAKE INSIDE! Ensure that temperatures are ideal, as specified in the preceding section, using a digital thermometer. Aspen shavings or reptile (hardwood like cypress) mulch can be used for substrate and it provides good insulation and heat dispersal for the heat mat beneath the container. Some keepers prefer to use paper towel or newsprint, but it does not insulate nor hold humidity.

**HEALTH**

Boa constrictors are hardy snakes as long as the environmental parameters of heat and humidity are carefully managed. They were not tolerate cold or dryness well, and poor ventilation and excessive heat can also lead to health issues.

A watchful and conscientious keeper becomes accustomed to his pet's behavior and will notice when something seems amiss. Noting snake behavior and recording meals, defecation, shedding, etc. in a log book will help you assess your snake's health. The sooner a problem is noticed the more likely it can be corrected. Even something as simple as skin-shedding and defecating are things that should be observed and recorded. If a snake suddenly has loose stool it may be an indicator of a serious problem. A properly maintained boa will normally shed its skin in one piece. If it had been and then sheds in pieces it may be insufficient humidity or temperature, or something worse still.

Coughing, wheezing, and runny or constricted nostrils can be signs of respiratory infection and may require attention from a reptile veterinarian (see [arav.org](http://arav.org)). If these symptoms are caught immediately simply correcting the environment and elevating the temperature for some time may work.

One potential threat to boa constrictors is the snake-mite and it is thought this parasite may pass disease from one snake to another. Every snake keeper should be well aware of how to detect mites early and eradicate them quickly.