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BRAZILIAN RAINBOW BOA

INTRO

Rainbow boas are fairly small and easy to keep, and the Brazilian subspecies is one of the most beautiful snakes. Known scientifically as *Epicrates cenchria*, the rainbow boas get their popular name from their highly iridescent shiny scales, which are dazzling in light particularly in freshly molted snakes.

Rainbow boas are found primarily in northwestern South America, with some forms reaching Central America, and occur as a handful of distinct subspecies. Recently, some former subspecies have been elevated to full species. This includes the well-known Colombian or Brown Rainbow Boa, which is now known as *Epicrates maurus*. Modern work on the taxonomy of these snakes has shown that they are more closely related to the anacondas (*Eunectes*) than Caribbean species of *Epicrates*. However, the rainbow boas are not giant snakes, and the two races most commonly kept in herpetoculture - the Colombian and the beautiful Brazilian - rarely exceed three or five feet, respectively.

Brazilian Rainbow Boas are tropical rainforest species that require elevated humidity and careful attention to both temperature and humidity ranges. In fact, a perspective rainbow boa keeper should think about dart frogs rather than commonly kept snakes such as ball pythons or corn snakes when designing housing. It is essential that any rainbow terrarium or enclosure be set up and functioning within correct parameters for some time before acquiring its inhabitant to ensure that the environment will be ideal. Although the necessary humidity and temperature for successful rainbow boa husbandry is very specific, as long as the environment is properly maintained rainbow boas thrive in captivity.

GENERAL CARE & ENVIRONMENT

A Brazilian Rainbow Boa would be a good candidate for a naturalistic vivarium and display, but most keepers elect to use plastic storage containers customized for snake keeping. Humidity is essential and the best way to accomplish elevated humidity is with a large water bowl and reduced ventilation. An aquarium with a screen top allows for far too much evaporation to keep rainbow boas healthy and alive.

Brazilian Rainbow Boas live on the floor of the tropical rainforest among leaf litter and other cover. Their natural habitat indicates that they prefer higher humidity and cooler temperatures than what many other snakes or reptiles require. Even if kept in a simple enclosure like a clear plastic sweater box, keepers of rainbow boas should be diligent about replicating the environment that would be found at ground level in the Amazon basin.

Since ideal temperature and humidity is of paramount importance, a min/max thermometer with a probe that can be inserted through a hole into the enclosure is mandatory. Both temperature and humidity should be monitored several times each day and observations should be recorded. An ambient temperature of about 78°F with a small basking spot in the mid-80s is ideal. It is advisable to move the thermometer probe around the cage often and occasionally bury it in the substrate to obtain an accurate understanding of the terrarium temperatures. A heat lamp must never be used as it will desiccate the environment and also likely produce temperatures above those tolerated by rainbow boas.

A careful balance between high air humidity and moist to slightly-dry substrate is best for rainbow boas and takes some careful observations, considerations and adjustments to get perfect. Ideally the enclosure's substrate will not become overly moist (which causes a host of problems), but a combination of providing only the minimum of necessary ventilation and a large water dish will create humid conditions that create a slight amount of condensation on the lid or sides of the habitat.

HOUSING

As mentioned above, it is best to borrow from dart frog keepers rather than snake keepers when designing a rainbow boa enclosure. Their environmental needs are specific and they require higher humidity and

QUICK TIPS

- » 77-80°F ambient temperature with 82-85°F basking spot at all times.
- » Requires higher humidity and cooler temperatures than most popular tropical snakes.
- » Eats rodents.

cooler temperatures than many other tropical snakes.

Naturalistic terrariums can be used and live plants are great for providing both humidity, gas exchange and snake enrichment. However, many keepers utilize clear plastic storage boxes that have been adapted to reptile use by drilling or melting ventilation holes into the sides.

The small basking spot (82-85°F) should be provided with a heat mat beneath the enclosure and create a temperature gradient within the habitat. A heat mat should be controlled by a rheostat and have some airflow around it to reduce maximum temperature.

Coconut chips, other tropical bark chips or cypress mulch is the ideal substrate for these denizens of the tropical rainforest floor. Natural products that are untreated and have not been dyed should be used. The substrate must be monitored so that it will clump in your hand and leave it moist when released, but not so wet that you can wring moisture out of it.

One or more hides should be provided, including one that allows the snake to completely secrete itself in an extra-humid microhabitat. A large water bowl should allow the snake to completely soak itself. Although rainbow boas inhabit the forest floor, they do have semi-arboreal tendencies and will appreciate climbing opportunities if the enclosure has any height.

FEEDING

Young rainbow boas normally will accept live fuzzy mice and can often be adapted to accepting pre-killed and later thawed-from-frozen dead rodents from tongs. The latter may require wriggling the prey item around to simulate life or even gently tapping the snake on the snout. When the snake seizes the prey it is best to shake it a bit to simulate struggling. Many keepers like to offer a variety of prey for both maximum nutrition and snake enrichment and rainbow boas are known to accept mice, rats, chicks, quail and even young guinea pigs. Babies should be fed one appropriate prey animal every 5-10 days and adults one or two prey items every 10-15. Rainbow boas are prone to regurgitate if offered too large of a prey item or meals or are fed too often. **DO NOT POWER FEED!**

HEALTH

A keeper who monitors temperature and humidity several times each day and provides the correct environment should rarely encounter any health problems in these hardy snakes. Any signs of respiratory distress such as bubbling at the nostrils or mouth or labored breathing, or any other sign of illness, should be immediately addressed by a reptile veterinarian (www.arav.org)

HANDLING

Rainbow boas are terrarium pets that are best left alone. However, occasional gentle handling and the resultant exercise can be beneficial.

SEXING RAINBOW BOAS

Accurate sexing requires a trained and experienced individual probing for the presence or absence of hemipenes. This procedure must not be attempted by inexperienced keepers. In general, females have shorter tails that taper quickly from the vent (cloaca), whereas males have longer tails that taper more gradually.

