

## **QUICK REFERENCE**

DIET: Rodents

TEMPS: 80-84 F w/ basking 88-94 F

HUMIDITY: 50%-60%

LIFESPAN: 20-30 years or more

## **DESCRIPTION**

Ball pythons are a relatively small, thick-bodied species of python featuring a slender neck and well differentiated head. Common "wild-type" ball pythons are highly variable in color and pattern, but all feature some version of tan "blobs" on a chocolate or black background, edged with varying degrees of white, with white bellies that may or may not contain some dark speckling pattern. Thanks to the efforts of breeders and enthusiasts, however, ball pythons are becoming increasingly available in a wide range of brilliant colors and patterns called "morphs."

Ball pythons are found in the wild in central and west Africa and typically make their homes in abandoned rodent burrows or termite mounds. Their common name "ball" comes from their tendency to curl up into a ball and hide their head within their coils when threatened. This un-aggressive defense mechanism, combined with their manageable size (<6') and ready availability make them extremely popular in the pet industry.

## **HOUSING**

The most popular and convenient methods of housing ball pythons includes glass tanks, plastic tubs, or professionally built enclosures. Whether you choose one of these, or choose to make your own, any enclosure must provide the following necessities:

- \* adequate ventilation to prevent stagnant air
- \* thermal gradient
- \* proper humidity levels
- \* sufficient space without being too large
- \* security to prevent escape

For juvenile BPs up to 2' a 10 gallon (or equivalently sized) enclosure is adequate. For adults an enclosure 36x18x12" should provide them with enough room for the duration of their lives.

**GLASS** – Aquariums or "Kritter Keepers" (glass tanks made for holding small animals) are readily available, offer the best visibility for viewing your snake and come in a wide variety of sizes. However, it can be difficult to maintain the proper heat and humidity, especially in larger tanks. In

addition, the clear sides all around may make a shy ball python feel exposed and insecure. Care must be taken to insure the lid is secured to prevent escape.

**PLASTIC** – Use of plastic storage tubs (usually by Sterilite or Rubbermaid) has become an increasingly popular option which is cost effective, utilitarian and very functional. Their lighter weight makes cleaning very easy, and multiple tubs can be stacked in rack systems to hold multiple animals in a relatively small space. Holes for ventilation can be made in the plastic using an inexpensive soldering iron and can be placed strategically to allow vertical air movement and cross-ventilation. The downside is that these plastics lack the true transparency available in glass and this can be an aesthetic deterrent to some.

**PROFESSIONAL/CUSTOM** - Professional-level snake enclosures from manufacturers such as Animal Plastics, Neodesha, etc. These can be purchased online or at reptiles shows and come either fully assembled or requiring assembly. Many of these can be ordered with custom features such as heat tape, heat panels, ventilation and lighting options as well as featuring great visibility but also tend to cost significantly more than glass or plastic.

### **SUBSTRATE**

Under no circumstances should you keep these animals on pine or cedar. Pine, cedar and other phenol-containing woods have toxins which can cause significant health problems in a variety of herps and other animals and should not be used. Sand, gravel, and crushed walnut are also very poor choices for ball pythons.

Your choice on substrate should be something readily available and one which lends itself to easy spot cleaning and other cage maintenance chores. You should check your enclosure daily for odors or more visible signs or waste and remove them – replacing the substrate when necessary.

Some viable options for substrate include but are not limited to:

- \* Repti-Bark or Jungle Bark type chips
- \* Aspen
- \* Newspapers/Newsprint
- \* Paper towels
- \* Carpet (harder to maintain)
- \* Cypress Mulch
- \* Coconut Husk-based substrates

\* Care-Fresh or similar products that do not pose impaction risks

## **HIDES**

Ball pythons typically fairly shy and reclusive nocturnal animals and appreciate a good dark place to curl up and feel safe. It is best to provide two adequate hides in your BPs enclosure – one on the warm end and one on the cooler end so that it does not have to make a choice between regulating its body temperature and feeling secure (to their own detriment these snakes will sacrifice warmth in favor of a hide).

Hides can be constructed or bought in a wide variety of forms shapes materials. For best sanitation you should avoid hides that are very porous, difficult to clean or which could rot mold or mildew. Whether store-bought or homemade, a ball python will prefer a hide that is small and snug-fitting, so that it feels "hugged" on all side and even from above.

## **TEMPERATURE**

~80F (ambient temps)

~90F (basking temps)

75 or below is unhealthy

Night drops in temps are not necessary or desired

Maintaining proper temperatures is essential to keeping your ball python healthy – failure to do so can lead to a host of issues from poor feeding to potentially lethal respiratory infections. For this reason you want to make sure you are able to measure the temperatures accurately. The sticker-type thermometers used in aquariums, and the little dials usually found in pet stores are routinely inaccurate and do little more than measure the temps of the glass to which they are adhered. Do yourself and your ball python a favor and invest in a digital thermometer. One of the most cost-effective and easily available is the Accu-Rite digital thermometer/hygrometer combo available at large stores such as Wal-Mart. These retail for less than \$15 and include a probe making it possible to monitor the warm side and cool side temps as well as the humidity levels all simultaneously.

## **HEAT SOURCES**

You should **NEVER** use a **heat rock** with your ball python or put any sort of heat source inside the enclosure with your ball python that it can come into contact with! These snakes are not very sensitive to dangerous heat levels and can easily burn and injure themselves.

Ball pythons do very well when heated from below (UTH = under tank heat). This can be achieved with heat mats made specifically for this

purpose and found in most pet stores. Also available through online retailers is a product called Flexwatt, which is a thin sheet of heating elements that comes in a wide variety of customizable sizes.

When using any sort of UTH, make sure there is some clearance beneath the enclosure to allow air circulation to prevent a build-up of excess heat. Also, no UTH should ever be used without some sort of control on the amount of heat it puts out. A reliable thermostat (Johnson Control, Ranco, Herpstat or Helix) is best, but an inexpensive rheostat (dimmer switch) purchased from the hardware store can work as well.

Human heating pads should not be used.

Radiant heat panels are most often available as options in custom designed or professional level caging solutions and do not restrict themselves to UTH mounting approaches, often offering heat from a vertical or overhead source.

And finally, overhead heat in the form of light bulbs or Ceramic Heat Emitters (CHE). A CHE screws into a socket like a bulb, but provides only heat without any light. These can be used as a supplement to a UTH to help maintain warm enough ambient temps.

Bulbs and CHEs can work, but tend to dry out the air making it difficult to maintain healthy humidity levels. Also keep in mind that ball pythons are nocturnal creatures, and therefore a bright white light shining into their enclosure can cause stress. Red or blue "night" bulbs are best. Make sure that all such heat sources are out of reach of your snake or they will get burned!

## **HUMIDITY**

50%-60%

60%-70% during a shed cycle

Providing the proper humidity required by your Ball python is important in maintaining good health and non-problematic sheds. Both excessive and inadequate humidity levels can lead to illness in the form of respiratory infections and a very damp environment easily lends itself to the growth of mold and fungus which can contribute bacterial or fungal infections, scale or belly rot.

As with measuring temperature, gauging the humidity with a hygrometer is quite important. Again a digital solution is far superior to an analog one – the accu-rite unit mentioned above will handle measuring your humidity as well.

Methods to raise humidity in the enclosure include but are certainly not limited to misting, placing the water bowl directly above the heat source on the warm end or covering screen lids with Con-Tac paper or plastic wrap, or using a humidifier. **Do NOT** sacrifice ventilation or otherwise contribute to stagnant air conditions! You can also add a humid hide, giving your python a humidity-rich spot it can hang out in whenever it wants.

### **LIGHTING**

Neither UV lighting or supplemental lighting is required for ball-pythons. They do well with ambient room light, so long as the light is not constant and some sort of day/night schedule is provided. Excessive lighting can induce high stress levels in these nocturnal creatures.

### **WATER**

Your BP should have a readily available supply of fresh water at all times. When possible use a relatively weighted bowl or dish to prevent it from being overturned. Ball pythons are not often known for soaking in their water sources so an oversized container is not necessary unless needed as a means for maintaining adequate humidity. Often snakes who do enter their water supplies for the occasional soak will also defecate in it – so be prepared to clean and replace as needed. It is recommended the water be replaced (not just “topped off”) and the dish cleaned while doing so every few days at a minimum. Bottled water or special additives are not necessary.

### **FEEDING**

Ball pythons are primarily rodent eaters. In captivity, the most common diet is either domestic mice or rats. Other rodents may be offered, but bear in mind that ball pythons tend to "imprint" on a favorite prey item and may refuse anything else, so it's best to figure out not only what your snake will eat, but what is most readily available and convient for the keeper to obtain.

What size and how often to feed is always up for debate. Many keepers hold to the standard of feeding a rodent that is as big around at its widest point (the hips) as the snake is at its widest girth. With ball pythons, though, the best way to have a consistent eater is to feed smaller-than-typical prey sizes. A fully mature ball python can thrive on nothing more than a small rat (~50-60g) offered weekly.

How often to feed really depends on what size prey is being offered. If one

chooses to offer the smaller size, a feeding schedule of every seven days works well. Slightly larger prey items can be fed every ten days. Excessively large prey items will cause the ball python to refuse food on its own for an extended and unpredictable length of time.

Ball pythons seem to do well on a regular feeding schedule. Feeding every seven days on the same day of the week is a good way for the keeper to track the feeding schedule as well as being a routine the snake can become accustomed to. However, there is no one right way to go about it.

In the reptile world, there will always be an ongoing debate about whether it is best to feed live or pre-killed prey. We will leave that up to each keeper to decide for themselves.

**Live:** Never leave a live rodent unattended in your snake's enclosure. And do not leave it in for longer than 20 minutes or so. If the snake does not eat it within that time, remove it and wait until the next scheduled feeding day before attempting to feed again. It will NOT hurt your snake to miss a meal.

**Pre-killed:** A keeper may choose to kill the rodent first before offering it to their snake. This obviously prevents the risk of having your snake bitten by a live rodent. It is the keeper's responsibility to use a humane (as quick and painless as possible) death. Also, ensure that the rodent is truly dead and not just stunned. A stunned rodent that "wakes up" can be dangerous.

**Frozen/thawed (f/t):** There are many sources for rodents already killed and frozen. Commercial pet stores often carry them, as well as online vendors that can ship them out in bulk as needed. Local herp shows are another good source. Many snakes will readily accept prey that has been properly thawed and warmed. Rodents can be thawed overnight in the 'fridge and then warmed with either hot water or a blow dryer on feeding day. They can also be thawed in hot water (while zipped into a plastic bag). Be sure to never use boiling water or a microwave for thawing rodents, as you do not ever want to cook any part. Feel the belly and up under the ribs of the rodent to make sure it is warm all the way through.

Pre-scenting the area near your snake's enclosure is a good way to get a ready, rapid feeding response. Warming a f/t or pre-killed rodent nearby, or leaving a live rodent in a well ventilated (escape-proof!) container close to your snake's cage for 15-30 minutes can be a huge help in getting a sleepy snake ready to eat.

## **WHY WON'T MY SNAKE EAT?**

In almost all cases, a ball python refuses to eat due to husbandry issues. Especially a young one. If your snake misses more than one meal (sometimes they won't want to eat while in shed) please check the following possible causes:

**Lack of Security** -- No hides, or hides that are too large or exposed (ie: half logs). They prefer dark, tight hides they barely fit into. Also, if the enclosure is too large, or too open (glass) or in a high traffic area with a lot of loud noise or movement. Another snake in the same enclosure can also cause serious security issues.

**Over Handling** -- Frequent intrusions into the enclosure, changes to the enclosure, and/or long frequent handling sessions can cause a shy snake to feel vulnerable and refuse to eat.

**Improper Temps** -- Temps that are too high or too low, or temps that fluctuate too much. Make sure you have an accurate and consistent read on your temps.

**Improper Lighting** -- Bright white lights shining directly into the enclosure, or 24 hour lighting can cause stress. Make sure there is some sort of day/night cycle.

**Offering New Prey** -- Changing prey species (ie: mice to rats) or methods (ie: live to f/t) can cause refusal. Such changes can be made, but may require patience and persistence.

**Improper Offering of Prey** -- Offering prey too frequently can do more harm than good. If a snake refuses, do not attempt to feed again for a week. Also, changing environments by moving to a feeding-box or removing hides and "furniture" can cause refusal in these shy snakes.

**Prey Too Large** -- Too large an item may intimidate a snake and cause refusal, or even a regurgitation if it is eaten. Also, if a ball python has eaten large meals in the past, it can cause a sudden an indefinite period of fasting.

**Mites** -- An external parasite common to snakes that must be treated and eradicated. A product called Provent-a-Mite (P.A.M.) is the safest and most effective method.

**Seasonal** -- Sexually mature ball pythons may fast for anywhere from a few weeks to a few months during their mating season (typically anywhere from late fall to early spring) especially if a sexually mature snake of the opposite sex is in close proximity.

**Illness** -- If all other possible reasons are eliminated, a vet check may be in order to look for internal parasites, as well as possible infections to the skin, scales, mouth or respiratory system.

Fortunately, ball pythons are extremely hardy snakes that can go for months (if necessary) of fasting without suffering any ill effects. This gives a responsible keeper plenty of time to figure out why the snake refuses to eat and get them on a regular, consistent feeding regimen.

### **SHEDDING**

Given good husbandry practices and properly maintained humidity your Ball python should have no problems shedding successfully. Many folks believe “one-piece-sheds” to be a hallmark of good husbandry, but this is sometimes heavily dependent on how the snake sheds and what items within the enclosure can be used to rub against. So long as the snake sheds completely without retained patches, eye-caps or partial/incomplete sheds requiring special attention or intervention you are doing just fine.

Signs of an imminent shed include a pink or reddish belly, eyes that turn a milky blue-white, and fading colors. These signs clear up a few days before the actual shed. During this time it is a good idea to pay special attention to your humidity levels – bumping them to 60%-70% to ensure there is enough moisture present to assist in the process.

Soaking prior to a shed is not necessary and can actually make the shed go poorly. However, if a shed has already gone bad, soaking can be very helpful in removing the retained skin.