



## **Black Headed Python** *Aspidites melanocephalus*

**BLACK HEADED PYTHON** (*Aspidites melanocephalus*) - Maximum length approximately 3.0m. DPaW Herpetofauna Licence Category 4.

**NATURAL HABITAT:** Northern Australia from North West Cape, Western Australia eastward to Gladstone, Queensland.

**CAUTION:** Black Headed Pythons are non-venomous, but large individuals can deliver a painful and bloody bite.

**HOUSING:** Black Headed Pythons are best housed separately except when breeding. It is best to keep young pythons in smaller enclosures, as they can be intimidated by large spaces. Hatchlings can be kept in medium to large plastic tubs (preferably secure rack-type or click-clack style) providing proper ventilation, a number of suitable hides, a clean fresh water source, and appropriate heating. As the snake grows, it should be moved into appropriately larger accommodation. All vivariums used must be adequately ventilated; any build-up of condensation would indicate damp conditions, poor ventilation or both. Appropriate measures should be undertaken to avoid such conditions as they can predispose to a wide range of medical problems. Wire fronted cages are unsuitable for snakes. All cages must be secure and escape proof.

Vivarium sizing: Please refer to our table of vivarium sizes against animal size overleaf.

**CAPTIVE ENVIRONMENT:** Vivarium furnishings should be kept simple, with no sharp edges or points, and include strong climbing branches and a number of appropriate hide boxes. These should be constructed so you can access the snake at any time. Try not to clutter the vivarium; this will allow plenty of room for the snake to move around and exercise. The floor covering or substrate should be easily removable for cleaning. Some options are newspaper, paper towel, paper cat litter, woodchips and indoor-outdoor carpet. A number of hide boxes should be provided in order to allow the snake to retreat and to also thermoregulate at different points of the vivarium. Avoid use of adhesive tape inside the vivarium, as this can come loose and pose a serious risk to your snake.

**TEMPERATURE & LIGHTING:** Pythons like to bask beneath a spotlight or radiant heat panel for several hours each day, however a heat pad or cable on or under a small section of the floor will allow ongoing access to a constant heat source. It is crucial that the snake is unable to wrap themselves around or have any direct physical contact with the heat source as this can lead to life-threatening burns. It is also very important NOT to use heat globes inside a plastic enclosure as this poses a serious fire risk.

Black-Headed Pythons are a sub-tropical / tropical species and for this reason the temperature at night should not be allowed to drop below 22C for an extended period.

The basking spot should be kept at 35°C – 40°C and the opposite end of the vivarium should be about 25°C. Hatchlings (< 1 year) are best kept to less of a gradient (around 28°C-35°C is appropriate). The heat source needs to be positioned at one end of the vivarium, creating a gradient of temperatures so that the snake can maintain a preferred body temperature by moving backwards and forwards (thermo-regulation) around the cage. Appropriate heating and lighting equipment can be obtained at most reptile pet stores and from online reptile equipment suppliers.

Generally the heat and light source should be switched on, usually by means of a timer switch, for 12 hours per day during the summer months with the photoperiod (the time the light is on) reduced to 10 hours during the winter months. With hatchling pythons (<1 year), heat should be provided 24 hours per day in order to ensure ideal growth and general health.

**It is strongly recommended that a thermostat and thermometer be used in all situations to regulate the heat source and monitor temperatures.**

**WATER:** Fresh clean water should be provided at all times in a solid non-spillable container and changed regularly.

**FOOD:** Black Headed Pythons will eat mice, rats or chickens of an appropriate size in relation to their own body size. Young pythons will become very active when hungry and require feeding every 7 – 10 days. Adults will often feed immediately after defecation. Frozen food items must be completely thawed before they are offered; this can be achieved by slowly warming them in a container filled with warm water, or leaving them to defrost naturally. Adults should be fed every 2-3 weeks. Many snakes will continue to eat any food that is offered hence it is important to be observant as some individuals may become obese. For adult animals it is better to feed fewer large meals than many small ones, though care should be taken as excessively large food items can cause digestion and/or regurgitation problems. Hatchlings can be fed fuzzy mice; older juveniles will take thawed adult mice or fuzzy rats, whereas near-adults will take small to medium sized rats, or other appropriately sized prey items. Adult snakes may feed regularly for several months and then abstain from eating for long periods, occasionally for as long as six months. If the snake is reluctant to take food off the floor, offer it held in tongs. Remember, they are low energy specialists spending most of their time doing nothing apart from basking. Avoid feeding if the snake has not been kept warm (i.e. during the winter months) or if sufficient heat is not available after feeding, as the food may decompose in the stomach before it can be digested, resulting in regurgitation, or even the death of your snake.

**SLOUGHING:** All snakes periodically slough (shed) the outer layer of their skin following the production of a new one beneath it. Younger individuals slough more often. Also, the more rapidly the snake grows, the more frequently it will slough. During the early stages of

the sloughing process you may notice your snake's colour beginning to darken and lose its lustre. This condition usually lasts for a few days to a week. With the completion of this stage an oily substance is secreted between the two layers, freeing and separating the old skin from the new. You will also notice the eyes in particular take on a milky appearance. Your snake will probably behave differently during this period. It will become more secretive and less active. During this time it should not be handled or fed. After a few days the milky appearance disappears and the snake becomes ready to slough its old skin. In order to commence the removal of this skin your snake may rub its snout along the vivarium wall or other cage furnishings to initiate this process.

Some snakes may have issues with sloughing. This problem can have a variety of causes, the most common being associated with too dry an environment or substrate for the particular species. This can be remedied by providing a water bowl big enough for the animal to soak in or by placing it in a damp ventilated tub for a few hours. Failure to shed the spectacle (clear scale over the eye) can cause longer-term issues if not addressed, so it is best to check around the rim of each eye to make sure the old skin has not been retained. If problems persist veterinary advice should be sought.

**CAPTIVE BEHAVIOUR:** Young pythons may be nervous and bite. Most will settle with time and tolerate handling. Never grip the snake and restrict its movement during handling as it will become alarmed. Do not handle a snake for several days after it has eaten, nor when in pre-slough condition - that is from commencement of "milky" eyes until it has shed its skin.

Pythons are active day and night. The extent of their activity is often related to the season.

**SEX IDENTIFICATION:** Probing by an experienced person can determine the sex of your snake and should not be attempted by the inexperienced as if done inappropriately serious damage can occur. As a general indication, female pythons usually grow longer and heavier than males.

**HEALTH PROBLEMS:** Reptiles in general are very good at hiding their health problems until they have become very serious. For this reason it is important that if your python develops health problems, it should be examined by an experienced reptile veterinarian. The West Australian Herpetological Society can provide contact information for recommended veterinarians in WA. Common problems where veterinary advice is recommended are wheezing, shedding difficulties, prolonged fasting outside of the cooler months, lethargy, diarrhoea, abnormal movement, prolapsed cloaca, and regurgitation.

**QUARANTINE:** Parasites and highly dangerous reptile viruses can decimate any collection. For this reason, newly acquired animals should be quarantined for at least three to six months before introducing them to those already being kept. Quarantined animals should be kept in a separate room with no shared contact or airspace. Any handling, feeding or cleaning of the cages should be completed last after all the other non-quarantined animals.

**REPTILE MITES:** Reptile mites are the scourge of many keepers. They can rapidly multiply and quickly kill a reptile. They can also spread dangerous viruses from one animal to another. If an infestation is found, it is imperative that you take immediate action to eradicate it and seek veterinary assistance if required. Although small (a large female may be one-third the size of a pin head) they will be obvious on white paper as miniature black tick-like animals. If you find you have an infestation, it is important to kill it in situ. Treatment is to apply a safe reptile insecticide to both reptile and vivarium, as per directions on commercially available products obtainable at most pet stores. Infestations in larger collections will require the treatment of every animal and vivarium, plus the entire room to avoid re-infestation.

**TICKS:** When first obtaining your reptile, check it for ticks. These are often seen latched onto the skin and protruding from the scales. They can be removed using tweezers and the bite site dabbed with antiseptic.

**Minimum Vivarium Sizes:**

These sizes provided are minimum recommended sizes only and not necessarily required sizes. With the exception of hatchling snakes, which often benefit from relatively smaller caging to their size, larger sizes than the minimums provided are acceptable as long as suitable and adequate shelter (hide boxes etc) is provided.

The circumference may include the height and length, or the length and depth of the cage providing the snake has the ability to climb or perch.

Vivarium sizes provided refer to the animal's permanent accommodation where such animal normally resides. These minimum dimensions provided do not apply to temporary accommodation (transit / feeding / cleaning).

**Under 80cm length.**

Size	No. snakes per cage	Snake Length cm	Area for cage (m <sup>2</sup> )	Example cage dimension
1	1	Up to 20	0.02	20 x 10cm
2	1	20.01 - 30	0.03	30 x 10cm
3	1	30.01 - 40	0.04	40 x 10cm
4	Up to 2	40.01 - 80	0.12	40 x 30cm

**Snakes in excess of 80cm in length should be kept in vivaria where the circumference horizontally or vertically should be 1.5 x the length of the snake.**

**Examples illustrated below:**

Size	No. snakes per cage	Snake Length (cm) x 1.5 = circumference	Corresponding Area for cage (m <sup>2</sup> )	Example cage dimension
5	Up to 2	120 x 1.5 = <b>180cm</b>	0.18	60 x 30cm
6	Up to 2	160 x 1.5 = <b>240cm</b>	0.32	80 x 40 cm
7	Up to 2	220 x 1.5 = <b>330cm</b>	0.6	120 x 50 cm
8	Up to 2	300 x 1.5 = <b>450cm</b>	0.875	175 x 50 cm



*Photographs courtesy of Richard Lawrance*

**FURTHER READING:**

Keeping and Breeding Australian Pythons – Edited by Mike Swan

Care of Australian Reptiles in Captivity – John Weigel. Reptile Keepers Association, Gosford, NSW.

Understanding Reptile Parasites - Roger J. Klingenberg. AVS, USA.

**DISCLAIMER:** *It is important to note that WAHS caresheets are suggestions only, and are based on input from experienced reptile keepers within WAHS and further afield where required. WAHS encourages keepers to gather information from a wide range of sources. You should always check for mandatory requirements with the relevant licensing body – in Western Australia it is the Department of Parks and Wildlife.*