



Why Do Ball Pythons Make Great Pets?

Ball pythons are one of the most popular pet pythons in the world! Their small but heavy bodied size and color and pattern variations makes this one hardy and attractive snake for both novice and experienced pet parents alike. Additionally, their shy and docile nature make them a manageable python to handle. As per their vernacular, “ball” pythons have a tendency to ball up when frightened rather than bite, especially as hatchlings. They don’t grow overly large, which means caring for them and feeding them is both feasible and affordable for the average person or family.

Lifespan

Ball Pythons are a long-lived species and with proper care can live 30 or more years.

Size

Hatchlings measure approximately 10” while adults measure 3 to 6 feet in length. Females are typically longer and heavier bodied (4 to 5 feet) than males (2 to 3 feet) when mature.

Natural History

Ball Pythons are native to central and western Africa. Their natural habitat consists of grasslands, savannahs, open jungles, and even human inhabited agricultural zones. They spend most of their time on or underground in burrows and are most active during dawn and dusk.

Housing

Despite their smaller size, ball pythons are still heavy bodied snakes and should be housed in an enclosure that can be as simple or as elaborate as you want it to be, as long as it is comfortable and provides adequate space for movement. Hatchlings can be housed in a standard 10 to 20-gallon tank, but as they grow enclosure size must be increased. A single adult can be housed in a mid-sized enclosure, such as a 40-gallon breeder tank (36”x18”x12”) or larger.

Lighting & Heating

To properly thermoregulate, reptiles must be provided with a healthy temperature gradient as is appropriate for each species. For ball pythons, these crepuscular, African snakes enjoy consistent temperatures!

Provide your ball python with a basking temperature of 95F. The ambient temperature should remain between 75-80F, and never fall below 75F. The use of heating pads and CHE’s (ceramic heat emitters)/white incandescent basking bulbs/red or purple basking bulbs are the best way to provide heat for this species. Never use heat rocks as these may burn your snake! Humidity should remain between 50-60%. Measure temperatures and humidity closely with digital thermometers/hygrometers at both warm and cool ends of the enclosure.

Although this species is nocturnal, these snakes can benefit from a low output UVB. Exposure to appropriate wavelengths of UV can provide a 12/12 day/night cycle for your snake and display your snake in its best colors. Providing a low output UVB is recommended but is not necessary.

Substrates & Cage Décor

A wide range of substrates are available for ball pythons. While they may live in drier savannahs, underground the relative humidity is much greater than above ground. In other words, your ball python would thrive in a substrate that best mimics its natural habitat. Cypress mulch, orchid bark chips, coconut husk/soil, or a mixture can be used with ball pythons*.

Ball pythons love to explore, so long as they feel safe and secure! They need to be able to hide during the day and explore at night. Cork bark flats, cork rounds, flat pieces of driftwood, and commercially available reptile décor work well. Artificial plants as well as live ones may be used as well. Provide a variety of hiding places on both the warm and cool ends of the enclosure.



Offer your snake a water bowl and maintain proper humidity levels by misting the enclosure often. As they spend most of their day in a moist burrow, a moist hide should also be provided. To stimulate this in your enclosure, add moistened moss to one of your hide boxes to create a microclimate that keeps your python hydrated and aids in shedding. Mist the moss with water periodically.

Diet & Nutrition

Ball pythons are carnivores, meaning they primarily consume rodents and do not eat plants or insects. Feed your python appropriately sized rodents (preferably frozen/thawed mice or rats), such that prey items are no larger than the widest circumference of the snake. Young pythons can be offered food weekly, while adults can be fed bi-weekly or twice monthly.

Pythons should be fed in a separate enclosure, or a “feed box.” This dissociates your hand from becoming dinner anytime you enter your snake’s enclosure for handling or maintenance. Place your snake in its feed box with the thawed mouse/rat. Rodents may be offered off of tongs or simply placed into the box.

Do not handle your snake for at least a day after feeding to reduce the risk of regurgitation. It is not uncommon for healthy ball pythons to go off of feed during the drier, winter months or during shedding. Continue your husbandry routine as usual and keep handling to a minimum. Try offering your snake food every 10-14 days until your snake is interested in eating again. If your snake continues to be disinterested in food in addition to losing weight, then you may need to reevaluate your husbandry and/or schedule a vet appointment.

Handling & Temperament

As a standard, do not handle your snake until it has settled into its new home. This may take at least 2 weeks. Ball pythons are generally shy and will spend most of their time hiding. Once your snake has settled and has been observed exploring its enclosure freely, begin handling. It is recommended that you start this process in the tank or in your lap, supporting its whole body with both hands while doing your best to avoid quick movements. Ball pythons often hide within their coils when picked up. Allow your snake to uncoil and explore your hands on its own. With persistence, ball pythons can become handable, docile, and rewarding pets.