

Roger's Aquatics & Pet Supplies: Corn Snakes

Elaphe guttata, commonly known as the corn snake is a great beginner level snake. They can be found spread across 23 states in Eastern and Central America, as well as some parts of Mexico and the Cayman Islands. They typically range anywhere from 3 – 6 feet in length, but retain a slim build, unlike many pythons and boas do. The typical lifespan of a corn snake can be anywhere from 10 – 20 years. These critters are crepuscular, meaning they like to come out during the evening.

Enclosure: Size, Substrate, and Accessories

While the commonly recommended minimum size enclosure for an adult corn snake is a 20 gallon long, we feel that a 40 breeder (36" by 18" by 18") is a much better size. Smaller tanks, such as 10 gallons, can be used for younger snakes. The tank should have a secure lid – clips are a must and weights may be necessary – to ensure that the snake does not escape.

Aspen is the preferred substrate for corn snakes. A minimum of 2 – 3 inches should be provided. Some keepers will use reptile carpet, but we find that corns like to bury and this allows them to do so. Substrates that will hold a lot of humidity (such as cypress or orchid bark) should be avoided as too high of a humidity level can lead to a respiratory infection.

When furnishing the tank, keep in mind that corns typically inhabit forests, rocky hillsides, and farm areas. They will appreciate rocks and branches – while corns are mostly ground dwellers, some have been known to behave as if they are semi-arboreal at times. The additional furnishings will also help the corn snake when it is in shed, as they can use it to pull off the old skin. A house or hiding space of some sort should be provided on each end. It should just fit the corn inside of it – too big and they may not feel fully secure.

Lighting and Heat

A basking area of 85 – 88 F with a cool end of 70 F should be provided. This can be achieved two different ways – a heat pad or a heat lamp with a daylight heat bulb of an appropriate wattage. In general, heat pads are preferred for snakes since the underbelly heat is good for digestion. If a heat pad is used, it should be hooked up to a thermostat. At night, corn snakes can comfortably sit at 72 – 75 F. A proper thermometer should always be used to measure the temperature. Too hot, and the animal could overheat. Too cold, and they won't grow properly or won't digest properly. Digital is preferred, since it is more accurate.

UVB is not considered necessary for this species but studies have shown it to be beneficial. If only a heat pad is being used, a UVB light overhead can help create a natural daytime/nighttime cycle.

Diet and Supplements

Young corns can be started on pinky mice and gradually be fed larger ones as they grow. Prey can be offered once every 5 – 7 days. Adults may feed on adult mice, or appropriate sized rats. Corn snakes are typically good eaters and usually take to frozen/thawed (f/t) rats quite easily. Offered f/t rats is preferred over live feeding since there is no potential danger for your snake. There are a couple of ways to defrost rodents. Firstly, they can be thawed in your refrigerator. Usually it is easiest to place the rodent in the fridge over night, but if you do it the same day, a mouse should thaw within 2 hours, and a rat in 4 – 5 hours, depending on temperature of fridge and size of prey. It's best to rebag the rodent from the bag it was sent home in and place it in a designated rat defrosting container/bowl/thing so as not to contaminate your own food and compromise your health. Remember, these rodents are frozen along with whatever was in their intestines at the time. Rodents can also be thawed in cold water. A prey item can be placed in a leak-proof bag and floated in the water until

it defrosts. After the rodent is defrosted using your preferred method, the rodent needs to be warmed. This can be done by either placing the rodent (still in a bag) in a warm but not hot container of water until it has a temperature as close to a live rodent as possible. We have also had success warming prey items under heat lamps with careful monitoring – overheating can invite unwelcome bacteria, and cooked rats are not a pleasant thing to deal with. The common mistakes with feeding f/t rodents are thawing out in a temperature that is too warm, microwaving them, and refreezing refused prey items. However, if your feeding plans change and you have thawed the prey out in the refrigerator and have not removed it from there yet, it can be refrozen. During the actual feeding, you may have to wiggle the rodent by its tail using tongs in order to entice the snake, although we have seen some that will eat f/t rats without doing this. If for some reason your snake absolutely refuses to eat frozen, always make sure you stay with the snake until the rodent is dead, and be prepared to intervene if the rodent begins to attack. It's helpful to have a set of tongs or even a snake hook with you, so you can either remove the rodent, remove the snake, or if the snake has grabbed the rodent but did not wrap around its body properly, block the rodent from reaching your snake.

Hydration and Humidity

A water dish should always be offered in the tank. It should be replaced every second day (or immediately if it's been pooped in) and bleached at least once a week to prevent the growth of bacteria. No specific humidity level is required, but a proper hygrometer should always be used to measure the humidity levels and make sure they aren't getting too high. Digital is preferred, since it's more accurate.

Cohabitation

Most people will recommend against housing two corns together. They are more or less solitary and have no benefit to being near another snake unless for breeding purposes. Many keepers will let the animals breed and freeze the eggs so they do not have to deal with the responsibility of the babies – this is not an acceptable solution if you knowingly let your animals breed with no intent of raising the babies. Each time the female lays eggs, she is depleting her fat and calcium stores needlessly, and if she is not replenished properly she is at risk for things like metabolic bone disease, and in extreme cases death. If she does not have a suitable lay box, she may hold onto the eggs until they are too big for her to lay, resulting in egg binding. When this happens, the animal needs immediate surgery. Additionally, if one gets sick, the other is pretty much guaranteed to get sick as well, costing you double the vet bills, double the meds, and causing double the stress.

Sexing

The only way for an average owner to properly sex a snake is to bring it to the vet and have it probed. Other methods of sexing can either be risky and should only be left to professional breeders, or have no real accuracy to them and will not be discussed here.

Checklist of Supplies

- ✓ Appropriate size tank with clips
- ✓ Heat lamp and bulb OR heat pad with thermostat
- ✓ Thermometer
- ✓ Hygrometer
- ✓ Feeding tub (optional)
- ✓ Aspen shavings
- ✓ House
- ✓ Branches or rocks
- ✓ Snake hook (optional)