

Ball Python



Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Subphylum: Vertebrata
Class: Reptilia
Order: Squamata
Family: Boidae
Genus: *Python*
Species: *regius*



Photo courtesy of Karen Marzynski

Habitat

- **In the Wild:** Ball pythons range from Senegal to Togo in West Africa and eastward to the Nile River in southern Sudan. They are found in dry grassland, savanna, and forest edges.
- **Exhibit Location:** Zoo to You Collection

Characteristics

- Ball pythons may reach a length of 3-6 feet, with females being larger and heavier bodied than males.
- The head is flat on top, with a square boxy snout. They have heavy jaw muscles that make the sides of its head, behind the round eyes, bulge outwards. The neck is narrower than its head, and its stout trunk region can easily have a diameter of more than twice the width of its head. Its short tail tapers to a blunt end.
- Alternating black and pale stripes along its face partly mask its dark eyes. Large uneven spots of medium brown, outlined in off-white then in black, mark its dark brown back and sides. These funnel down toward the off-white or pale gray belly. There are also a few rare color variations that occur through captive breeding.
- There are 100-150 sharp teeth that curve towards the back of its mouth.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** 10-15 years; **In Captivity** 20-25 years (record is 47 years)

Behaviors

- Ball pythons are good climbers, but are usually seen on the ground. In dry months they live in mammal burrows or other underground areas. They tend to fast and become inactive during the cool season when temperatures in their environment don't keep their bodies warm enough to digest food.
- They are nocturnal (active at night) and solitary (live alone).
- Ball pythons kill their prey by wrapping them in constricting coils or pressing them against burrow walls, thereby suffocating them.
- As a defense, they coil into a tight ball (hence the name) with the head tucked between the coils. This is an avoidance technique, protecting the head.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** changing exhibit furniture

Reproduction

- Ball pythons reach sexual maturity at 5 years of age. Females breed every 2-3 years. When gravid (pregnant) the females' color darkens, perhaps so basking will warm them more. They then shed their skin about 1 month before laying the eggs.
- Ball pythons have spurs, the vestiges (leftovers) of ancestral legs. The males' spurs are longer and are used to stimulate the female during courtship.
- Females lay 4-10 eggs in a humid, mammal burrow. Except for infrequent trips in search of water to drink, the female remains coiled around the eggs for the entire 75-80 day incubation period. If the incubation temperature drops below 87-90 degrees, the female rhythmically tenses her muscles burning energy to produce warmth. They may even raise the humidity in the burrow, if it drops below 90-95%, by taking a dip in water and returning while still wet. Most females eat little or nothing from the time they become gravid until the eggs hatch.

- The young are 9-17 inches long at birth and are completely independent.

Diet

- **In the Wild:** rats, gerbils, gerboas (will follow them into their burrows)
- **At the Zoo:** mice

Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** not listed; **CITES Appendix:** not listed
- Ball pythons are a favored food of various tribal groups within their range. They are also slaughtered for their skins. Habitat loss and capture for the pet trade (has a high death rate due to sudden change in diet and environment) will lead to the decline of this species in the wild.
- Permits are required for its legal export, living or dead. This has helped remove it from the Threatened List of Endangered Species.
- Predators: humans; adults are preyed upon by wild pigs, wart hogs, and leopards; young are vulnerable to many predators, including birds of prey and hedgehogs.

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- In Europe ball pythons are known as royal pythons.
- Ball pythons can easily find prey in complete darkness. This is due to heat sensing pits located along the upper jaw. The snake can tell which direction warmth is coming from because the pits open at different angles. A temperature change of only 3/1000th of a degree sends a signal to the brain, alerting the snake of a meal.

Sources:

- Oregon Zoo, (2005). Ball python. Retrieved Feb. 07, 2005, from Oregon Zoo Web site: http://www.oregonzoo.org/Cards/Ed_Program/ball_python.htm.
- Woodland Park Zoo, (2001). Ball python. Retrieved Feb. 07, 2005, from Woodland Park Zoo Web site: http://www.zoo.org/educate/fact_sheets/day/b_python.htm.