

Western Hognose Snake

by Mark Amey

Common name:

Western Hognose Snake (3 subspecies - Plains, Dusty, Mexican)

Scientific name:

Heterodon nasicus (Subspecies: *H.n. nasicus*, *H.n. gloydi*, *H.n. kennerlyi*)

Distribution:

Southern Alberta and Northwest Manitoba, south to Southeast Arizona, Texas, and into northern Mexico. Also Iowa, Minnesota, Illinois, Missouri, and Arkansas.

Habitat:

Relatively dry, sandy prairie areas, scrubland and river floodplains.

Size:

16-25 inches (record 35 inches)

Description of temperament

A wild caught specimen may flatten its head and neck, hiss, and even strike, but rarely, if ever, bites. If agitated to an extreme, the animal may even play "possum" by rolling over and playing dead. Captive hatched babies will also display some of these behaviours, but their willingness to do this diminishes with both wild caught and captive bred. Since state laws in some of their range protect these animals, it is best to obtain a captive bred.

Captive Care

Caging: Except in the case of an exceptionally large Hognose, a 10-gallon aquarium is big enough for this species. Substrates commonly used include AstroTurf, cypress mulch, aspen bedding, coarse sand, and newspaper (at least two weeks old to allow the ink to dry). Never ever use ground corncob as substrate for reptiles. Cob is easily ingested by the animals when they eat and can kill the animal by causing intestinal blockage (cob swells when it absorbs water, this also applies to cat litter pine pellets). Since Hognose are burrowers, cypress mulch, aspen bedding, or coarse sand would probably be the best choice of substrate. (Be careful when using sand, again it can cause serious problems by being ingested when the snake eats.) A hide box or cork bark should be provided to give the snake the privacy it may require. The cage can be

decorated with driftwood or climbing limbs as well as flat rocks and bark to provide hiding places. All of these will help the snake during its shed.

Temperature: Daytime temperatures should be 75-85°F and 8-10°C cooler at night time. Hot rocks are not recommended as basking sites because they can develop hot spots that can cause thermal burns. A better choice of heat source is an under-tank heater, some of which are adhesive and can also cause thermal burns. To prevent this problem, cover the heated area with slate (which diffuses the heat) and cover the slate with substrate. Placing an incandescent bulb (outside of the tank) can provide a basking site over a rock at one end of the tank. Make sure that the animal can escape the heat to a cooler spot at the opposite end of the aquarium (thermoregulation).

Food: In the wild this animal will eat toads, lizards, snakes, and reptile eggs, which I found out to the cost of four Hognose eggs. As the female was laying the male was eating. It will also take ground nesting birds and small rodents. Captive hatched will, in most cases, readily feed on pre-killed mice appropriately sized for the snake being fed. According to Dr. Roger Conant in the Peterson Field Guide, young may also feed on crickets and other insects. But I have no experience of this. Wild caught, with patience, can be conditioned to eat pre-killed prey. This is not true for the Eastern Hognose

Water requirements: A bowl filled with fresh clean water should be provided at all times.

Social Structure: Solitary except during breeding season (March through to April in the wild). But I find they house together with little problems, unless food is present, those rear fangs can damage each other.

Activity period: They are active during morning and late afternoon hours (crepuscular).

Miscellaneous Information: Hognoses seem to mimic rattlesnake species found in their range. Western Hognose look very much like prairie rattlesnakes (*Correlates viridis viridis*); Eastern Hognose resembles a dark-phase timber rattlesnake, etc. An excellent article on this subject was published in the December 1990 Tropical Fish Hobbyist magazine. Hognose snakes are also commonly known as puff or spreading adder or blow viper because of their defensive behaviour (spreading its hood, hissing, etc.). The animal is harmless. Eastern Hognose are not recommended as pets because they are frog and toad eaters and can be difficult, if not impossible, to feed during the winter.

Breeding: Start with a pair easy to sex (no probe required, males have longer tails). Once sexually mature, three months hibernation is needed for a good sperm count in males and to trigger ovulation in females. Cool down in November by a good 10 degrees Celsius and increase to normal over a two-week period in March. Once they have both shed their skin introduce the female to the male and they should copulate in the next few days. They should produce eggs in about 50 days. Incubated eggs at 26°C - 27°C. Once hatched, the youngsters should be feeding a week or so after shedding. I have had a Hoggy feed 60 days after hatching, so don't force feed, be patient.

