

HARMLESS SNAKES INFO SHEET

Snakes are enchantingly beautiful; with bright eyes, smooth, shiny scales, and vibrant skin colours and patterns. They are perfectly evolved predators that have existed on our planet for over 140 million years.

More than 3,600 species of snakes are currently known. They occur worldwide, except at high latitudes, remote islands and Antarctica. Snakes are among the most feared of all animals, but most are nonvenomous, and many are completely harmless to humans.

Hundreds of species of harmless snakes are kept as pets, however the following are particularly docile and easy to rear:

1. The corn snake (*Pantherophis guttatus*) occurs in a spectrum of colour morphs (genetic mutations), ranging from the wild-type (which has beautiful orange, red and brown patterned skin), to pure white strains.

2. The ball python, also known as the royal python (*Python regius*) is the smallest of the African pythons, and is so called because of its tendency to curl into a ball when frightened.

3. The western hognose snake (*Heterodon nasicus*) has a uniquely-shaped snout which it uses to excavate burrows.

4. Kingsnakes are a diverse group of species in the genus *Lampropeltis*. Many have vibrant patterns on their skins, often with contrasting bands and blotches along their backs.

5. The milksnake (*Lampropeltis triangulum*) is a species of king snake which typically has alternating bands of red-black-yellow or white-black-red. This harmless species mimics the deadly coral snake to scare away potential predators.

All of the above are medium-sized snakes, and grow to an adult size of 50 - 180 cm in length, making them ideal for keeping in vivariums at home.

Image 1: A portrait of a corn snake, *Pantherophis guttatus*;

Image 2: The desert kingsnake, *Lampropeltis getula splendida*.

Image 3: The western hognose snake, *Heterodon nasicus*;

Image 4: A "leopard spider" morph of the ball python, *Python regius*;



How to keep harmless snakes

The following is a brief summary and does not include all of the information required to look after these exquisite creatures. If you are interested in keeping harmless snakes, please refer to the sixteen page harmless snakes chapter in the *Weird and Wonderful Pets* book.

If you plan to keep a corn snake, a ball python, a western hognose or a milksnake, adults of these species will require a vivarium that is at least 125 cm long and 75 cm wide to give the snake sufficient space to move around and shed its skin. Young snakes can be kept in smaller enclosures temporarily,

The species of snakes documented here require temperatures of 23–29 °C during the day and slightly less at night. Heating can easily be achieved by using a dedicated heat pad. Ensure that the mat covers no more than one third of the tank, and that it is thermostatically controlled. Providing an unheated section of the tank is essential to allow the snake to cool off, when required.

Add sheets of newspaper, or pet-grade bark chippings or wood chippings (available from your local pet store) as a floor covering in your vivarium. Do not use cedar bark or shavings, as these are toxic to reptiles. Change the newspaper or substrate frequently to ensure that the snake habitat remains clean.

Add pieces of sterilised driftwood, cork bark, sticks and branches to give your snake furniture to climb on, and provide a bowl of water (large enough for your snake to soak in if it wishes). Change the water twice a week.

Installing a UV light or providing calcium supplements is not essential as it is with other reptiles that eat insects since snakes receive vitamin D3 and calcium from their prey. However, installing a heat lamp in a section of the vivarium is recommended to offer your snake a basking area.

Lastly, feed your snake one mouse per week. Frozen mice (available in a variety of sizes) are sold at pet shops. Never feed your snake live mice (as this can result in injury to the snake), and do not handle your snake for 48 hours after feeding (to avoid it regurgitating its meal). Your pet snake will be an endless source of interest, and if cared for correctly, will live for a decade.

Image 5: A corn snake, *Pantherophis guttatus*, exhibiting wild-type colours;

Image 6: A speckled kingsnake, *Lampropeltis getula holbrooki*;

Image 7: A “tricolor hypomelanistic” morph of the Honduran milk snake, *Lampropeltis triangulum hondurensis*;

Image 8: Nelson’s milksnake, *Lampropeltis triangulum nelsoni*.



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**Buy the *Weird and Wonderful Pets* book
to discover the biology, ecology, diversity
and how to keep harmless snakes.**

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