



Rat Snakes

Pantherophis spp. (benchmark: *P. obsoletus*)

BEGINNER · 4–6 FT ADULT · 15–20 YR LIFESPAN · ACTIVE CLIMBER · EASTERN NORTH AMERICA

North America's own big colubrid, and an easy one to recommend. Rat snakes are alert, curious and built to climb; give one a solid branch and it will spend real time up there. Most settle with steady, gentle handling. The honest catch is size. Keepers who buy a pencil-thin hatchling rarely picture the six-foot adult, and a six-foot snake wants a six-foot cage.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Beginner
Adult size	4–6 feet
Ambient temps	75–85 °F, 70–75 °F at night
Basking surface	85–88 °F
Humidity	40–60%
UVB	Low output, beneficial
Diet	Mice and rats
Feeding cadence	Every 7–10 days
Lifespan	15–20 years



Captive-bred rat snakes fill breeder tables at every NARBC show, and North America's own colubrids are an easy place to start.

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01

Alert, Not Aggressive

These are switched-on snakes, not sit-and-wait ambush animals. A rat snake watches you cross the room. Hatchlings can be nervy: expect tail-buzzing, musk, and a strike or two before they learn you aren't a hawk. Nearly all of them tame down with short, regular, unhurried sessions. Buy captive-bred. Wild-caught and rescued adults are common in this species, and they often arrive with parasites and defensive habits a home-bred hatchling never had.

02

Housing, Stage by Stage

A hatchling settles in a 16×8×8 and does better in a 20×12×12. Racks are fine through the juvenile years. From subadult on, floor space leads: a 48×24×24 minimum for an adult, 72×24×24 if you have the wall. Height helps only if you fill it with branches. Lids lock or they leave. One snake to a box, always: rat snakes are fast, food-driven feeders, and two feeding responses in one enclosure is how one ends up in the other's mouth. **Buy the hatchling only if you can house the adult.**

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	16×8×8	20×12×12	Black rat hatchlings are patterned, darkening toward solid black with age.
Juvenile	20×12×12	24×18×12	Strong climbers already: give them branches to work.
Subadult	36×18×18	48×24×18	Largest of the North American rat snakes: start planning the adult cage.
Adult	48×24×24	72×24×24	Big native colubrid, and a strong climber. Needs real climbing structure.

Habitat-OS life-stage guidance for rat snakes (benchmark: black rat snake; Texas and Baird's keep to the same numbers).

03

Heat, Light, and a Thermostat

Build the gradient along the long axis: 75–85 °F ambient, a basking surface at 85–88 °F, and a night drop to 70–75 °F you don't have to fight. Overhead heat suits a climber better than belly heat alone, and every heat source runs through a thermostat with a probe you can see. Heat rocks are not an option; they burn animals that fall asleep on them. UVB isn't mandatory here, but low-output UVB is genuinely beneficial for a species that's often active in daylight.

04

Humidity & Water

Aim for 40–60%, read with a digital hygrometer at snake level rather than on the glass at eye height. Most homes sit near that window without help. A water bowl big enough to soak in, refreshed often, covers most of the gap, and a damp hide carries a stubborn shed the rest of the way. Constant wet is the failure mode. Ventilation and a substrate that dries out between waterings keep scale rot and respiratory trouble out of the cage.

05

Substrate, Branches, and Hides

Aspen, cypress mulch, or a coco-and-topsoil mix all work; pick whichever holds your humidity without turning soggy, and give enough depth to push under. What this species really wants is wood. Thick, well-anchored branches, a cork round, and a shelf near the warm end turn a plain box into territory, and a climber with somewhere to go spends less time testing the lid. Two hides minimum, one warm, one cool, both snug.

06

Feeding

Rodents, start to finish. Hatchlings take pinky mice and adults take appropriately sized rats, but the cadence barely changes: every 7–10 days for life. Frozen and thawed is the standard, warmed through and offered with tongs. Rat snakes eat with enthusiasm and rarely refuse, which is exactly the trap. A willing snake and a generous keeper make a fat snake. Keep prey no wider than the animal's widest point and hold the schedule.

07

Health Red Flags

Respiratory infection is the one to memorize: open-mouth breathing, wheezing or clicking, bubbles at the nostrils, a snake propped head-up for hours. Cold or damp housing causes most of it. Watch also for shed coming off in pieces, retained eye caps, and a spine that reads ridged rather than rounded. Weigh monthly; the scale sees loss before you do. Any breathing sign, or mites, is a reptile-vet visit, not a forum thread.

Husbandry data: Habitat-OS species library. Structure follows the NARBC show handout series. Every animal is an individual — when in doubt, ask the breeder at the table or a reptile veterinarian.