



Western Hognose Snakes

Heterodon nasicus

INTERMEDIATE · 15–24 IN (FEMALES LARGER) · DIURNAL · REAR-FANGED · NORTH AMERICAN PLAINS

Nobody in the hobby does theater like a hognose. Flip up the pig snout, add a flattened hood, a huffing hiss and the occasional full death scene (belly up, tongue out), and you have a snake that is nearly all bluff. Western hognose are small, stout, day-active burrowers from the North American plains, simple to house and hard not to love. The honest footnote: they're rear-fanged and mildly venomous, and they earn their intermediate label at feeding time.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Intermediate
Ambient temp	78–85 °F
Basking spot	88–92 °F
Night temp	70–76 °F
Humidity	30–50%
UVB	Not required
Diet	Frozen-thawed mice
Adult size	15–24 in (females larger)
Activity	Diurnal burrower



Captive-bred western hognose, in a growing spread of morphs, are a fixture on NARBC tables; that upturned snout is a digging tool, not decoration.

Photo: Peter Paplanus / iNaturalist · CC BY

01

All Bluff, Mostly

Threaten a hognose and you get the full production: flattened hood, theatrical hissing, mock strikes delivered with a closed mouth. Real bites are rare and almost never defensive. The fine print: hognose are rear-fanged with mildly toxic saliva. Reactions are rare but real, so never let one chew on you, and keep fingers that smell like rodent out of the enclosure. They tolerate short, calm handling sessions well. Tolerate, not enjoy.

02

Housing by Life Stage

Hognose are floor-space animals: long and low beats tall every time. Hatchlings settle fastest in small, cluttered quarters and can be raised in rack tubs; adults deserve a proper enclosure, though a roomy rack can still work for a smaller male. House them one to an enclosure. These are solitary snakes with a serious food drive. Size for the snake you'll have, not the one you bought: females far outgrow males, so plan around her. Whatever the footprint, the depth that matters most is in the substrate.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	12×8×6	16×8×8	Rear-fanged with mild saliva toxicity. Reactions rare but possible.
Juvenile	16×12×8	20×12×12	Strong burrowers: give 3–4 inches of loose substrate.
Subadult	20×12×12	24×18×12	Females run significantly larger than males.
Adult	36×18×12	48×18×18	Females reach 2–3 ft, males 15–24 in; size the enclosure for her.

Minimum and preferred enclosure footprints follow Habitat-OS life-stage guidance.

03

Heat & Light

Hold daytime ambients at 78–85 °F with a basking spot of 88–92 °F, and let nights ease to 70–76 °F, a drop this plains native is built for. Every heat source runs on a thermostat, no exceptions. UVB isn't required for hognose, but they're day-active: give a clear light-dark cycle, and treat a low-output UVB bulb as a sensible upgrade rather than a requirement.

04

Humidity & Water

This is an arid-grassland snake, and moisture is the quiet killer in hognose setups: **keep the enclosure dry, 30–50% humidity**. Chronic damp from wet substrate or an over-misted cage invites scale and respiratory trouble faster than almost any other mistake. A bowl of fresh water is still standard; park it on the cool side, away from the basking end, so it isn't steaming the air. Come shed time, offer a moist hide for a few days instead of raising humidity across the enclosure.

05

Substrate & Burrowing

That upturned snout is a shovel, and digging is the whole point of this snake. Give 3–4 inches of dry, loose substrate and let the hognose do what it was built for. Aspen shavings are the hobby standard; skip sand and anything damp. Add a hide at each end and some low cover, then don't panic when the snake disappears: a buried hognose with just its snout showing is a comfortable hognose, not a missing one.

06

Feeding

In the wild this is an amphibian specialist; toads are the signature meal. In captivity, hognose take appropriately sized frozen-thawed mice readily, and that's the staple diet. Feed with tongs: the food response is enthusiastic, and most hognose bites happen at dinnertime, not during handling. The occasional stubborn hatchling starts feeding after prey is scented with frog or toad; a good breeder will have done this work already. Appetite says yes to everything, so judge portions by body condition, not enthusiasm.

07

Health Red Flags

Know the fake-out: a hognose belly-up, tongue lolling, is theater, not dying. The real warnings are quieter: wheezing, bubbling nostrils or open-mouth breathing in a dry-air species; pink, crusted or discolored belly scales from damp substrate; stuck shed; a day-active snake gone limp and uninterested. A refused meal means little; refusal plus steady weight loss matters. Weigh monthly. Any breathing sign or scale lesion is a reptile-vet visit this week, not a wait-and-see.

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.