

# CORN SNAKE CARE

By Amy Hankins

**Corn snakes (*Pantherophis guttatus*)** are one of the (if not *the*) best snakes to keep in captivity. Normally docile, readily accepting food, and growing to a very decent size, corn snakes make great reptile “pets.” They are fantastic for a beginner. They tolerate handling better than many other snakes, and there is an almost endless variety of colors and patterns to choose from.

## CHOOSING YOUR CORN SNAKE

You can start out with an adult, a sub-adult, or a baby. If you choose a baby, be aware that corns can be very skittish and squirmy (even aggressive) as young snakes. Adults tend to be much mellower overall, especially ones that have been handled frequently. Look the snake over and ask lots of questions before purchasing. Is it eating well? What does it eat (frozen/thawed rodents or live?) If you can, ask the person selling the snake if you can watch it eat. If it has eaten very recently, a visible bump will show in the mid-section of the snake’s body.

Finding wild caught corn snakes is becoming rarer and rarer with the number of specimens being born in captivity nowadays. I highly recommend a captive born snake, for several reasons; one being that a wild snake could be carrying parasites. Captive born snakes will be much healthier overall if they have been well cared for.

Cost varies, depending on what you fancy. If you go to a reptile show, there might be hundreds of colors to choose from. Many are *morphs*, meaning they have been bred for a specific color/pattern that is different from the original (wild-type). There seems to be almost an infinite variety of corn snake morphs available. To decide what strikes your fancy, I’d suggest surfing the internet. Many of these morphs are relatively inexpensive, and others are quite pricey.

## SIZE AND HOUSING

Corn snakes generally reach a length of 3.5 to 4.5 feet in adulthood, so they don’t get terribly large. A single adult corn snake can be housed in a 20-gallon long aquarium. It is highly recommended that corn snakes (or any snake for that matter) be housed separately. It makes feeding and cleaning much easier, and snakes are solitary animals, generally, that do not need “buddies.” I have housed snakes together before, but if you do so, observe them for a few days. It’s not advisable to house two males together, because of territory issues. Housing a male and a female together as full grown adults is okay, but one big caveat: **they may breed**, and this is a very distinct possibility. Males and females housed together as young snakes is risky, and should be avoided, as it is hard on a female to go through pregnancy if her body is not ready (I never bred any female snake under about 3 years old). Cannibalism is very uncommon with corn snakes, but *can* happen with any snake species (though I, personally have never experienced it with my corn snakes).

Should you decide to cohabitate two corn snakes, observe them very closely for at least the first week. In addition, two adults should not be housed together in anything smaller than either a 55-gallon aquarium or a cage at least 3’ wide by 24” deep. Crowding too many snakes together in an enclosure that is too small can cause serious stress and even death.

Make sure the cage lid fits **very tightly**. I cannot stress this enough. In my twenty plus years in this hobby, I have kept dozens of corn snakes, and some escaped from cages I was *sure* were secure. They are incredible escape artists. If the lid can be manipulated enough to fit their head through, chances are they can get their whole body out of the enclosure. Many cages are available from pet stores and online dealers, such as Herpcages.com, ZooMed, Neodesha and many others. These cages are made specifically for reptiles and are very secure.

For baby snakes. I would not recommend a 20-gallon tank. My favorite cage to house juvenile snakes in is the “Kritter Keeper” readily found in discount stores, such as Wal-Mart, and pet stores, such as Petco. These are clear plastic cages with very tight-fitting (usually colorful) lids that will house a baby corn snake comfortably for at least his first year or so. Plastic sweater boxes found at discount and dollar stores also work well and are inexpensive. Visibility of your snake may not be as good as in a Kritter Keeper-type enclosure, however. Should you choose to go with a sweater box, *make sure* that lid fits tightly!

Corn snakes are ectotherms, meaning they are cold-blooded, so some kind of heat source is recommended. They don’t need it extremely warm, however; I keep mine in a room where the ambient temperature is 75° - 80°, and they do quite well without individual heating. Many people do not keep their house at a steady 75° - 80°, however, so a heat pad or light is recommended. Heat pads are available at pet shops and from numerous online dealers. A thermostat should be used, as these heating pads can get extremely hot—too hot for the snake to lie on--and can cause injury.

The enclosure should have a cool side and a warm side. The cool side is where the water dish should be placed; a dish large enough for the snake to soak in if it chooses. They often do this before they shed their skin. The warm side is where the heat pad or light is situated, as well as a hiding place for your snake. Maximum temperature on the warm side can be anywhere from 80° to 84°. I have actually found that they seem to prefer it at the lower end. I personally see nothing wrong with keeping the warm end in the upper 70s, especially if your snake tends to hang out on the cool side most of the time.

An alternative to a heat pad is a light over the warm side. I tend to like lights better myself, as they don’t come into such close contact with the snake’s body. The need for a thermostat is also eliminated *as long as the temperature is monitored regularly*. Many of my corns rather seem to enjoy basking in the lights I have on them. I keep the lights on a timer, so that they go off a night. Snakes require a day/night cycle. Remember to try to keep the warm spot in the lower 80s temperature-wise in the day time. While UV lighting is necessary for many reptiles, it is not required for corn snakes. The sole purpose of the lamp is warmth. Many times, a regular light bulb will do the job.

**Do not use heat rocks.** Many pet stores sell these for reptiles and they are dangerous. The rock must be placed directly inside the enclosure, so that the animal can come into direct contact with it. I have seen some very severe cases of burns on reptiles due to heat rocks. Steer clear of these!

Snakes must have a place to hide to feel secure. Many items work as a “hide box”; I have cut a hole in the side of a salad bowl and inverted it so that the snake could climb in. People even use cereal boxes, flower pots and various other items. Companies that specialize in products made for reptiles make hides for snakes too; if you are going for a “fancier” look, there are hides that look like caves, hollow logs, and other natural-looking items. *Always thoroughly clean any cage furniture* before introducing it to your snake’s enclosure. Soapy bleach water is highly recommended.

## FOOD

Corn snakes eat rats and mice, hence their other common name, “Red Rat Snake.” They were, in fact, named for their propensity to hang around in corn cribs in barns, where there is normally a ready supply of rodents.

Most breeders start their baby corn snakes on a diet of frozen/thawed pinkie (newborn) mice. Some start the snakes on live prey, and this is why it is important to ask which a baby snake has been eating when you purchase a corn snake. In my experience, snakes that were started on live prey can be difficult to switch over to frozen/thawed. Frozen/thawed is much more convenient, as you can purchase several feeders at a time and store them in the freezer, thawing them out thoroughly before feeding to your snake.

The internet abounds with frozen feeder rodent sellers. RodentPro is one that I have been using for years. Many of them sell only in bulk, however, and if you are only keeping a few snakes you may not need to buy large quantities at a time. Many pet stores now offer frozen rodent feeders. Another idea is to find fellow snake

keepers in your area; they may be willing to go in on a bulk order with you or just sell you what you need a little at a time.

One more word about feeding: corn snakes will only eat mice or rats. All snakes are carnivorous. I have actually had people ask me if they will eat other things, but they require the rodent diet for much needed nutrients (such as the calcium from the bones). Corn snakes will not eat earthworms, fish or (yes, I have actually had people ask me this) vegetables. There are other snakes that will eat fish or worms, but sorry—no vegetarian snakes. Wild corn snakes have been known to eat lizards, but feeder lizards are extremely difficult to obtain, and generally are wild-caught and could likely contain parasites.

## CONCLUSION

This is a very basic sheet on how to care for your corn snake, Before purchasing any animal, research should be done; never count on one care sheet as the be-all-end-all. There are many different keepers and we all have our own style. In time, you will develop your own, should you choose to get serious about this hobby. There are a lot of very good resources out there about this wonderful snake, and I recommend you read everything you can get your hands on. If you meet an experienced keeper, get to know them, and pick their brain regularly, asking lots of questions.

Your animal, as an individual, will also let you know, in its way, what it needs: how it likes to be fed, what temperature it prefers, etc. Observe your snake on a regular basis. This is good for getting to know your snake's behavior patterns as well as keeping an eye out for anything unusual, like blisters on the skin, sores, bumps, or anything at all out of the ordinary. Veterinary care for reptiles is much more readily available currently than it has been in the past. Below I have listed two excellent reptile vets in the Springfield area that have both treated several of my snakes.

With the right care, your corn snake could live to be 20 plus years old. I just lost my very first corn snake to liver cancer at age 21. I have one, at present, who is 22 and still going strong.

## RECOMMENDED READING/RESOURCES

### Books

Love, Kathy and Bill. *Corn Snakes: The Comprehensive Owner's Guide (The Herpetocultural Library)*. **Advanced Vivarium Systems, 2006.**

### Websites

South Mountain Reptiles Corn Snake Care Sheet  
(Choose "care sheet" from the menu at the top of the page)  
<https://www.cornsnake.net/index>

### Local people with lots of experience with reptiles:

Dr. Ritt Enderson  
Bradford Park Veterinary Hospital  
1255 E Independence St, Springfield, MO 65804  
(417) 886-0777

Finley Valley Serpentarium  
699 Riverdale Rd, Ozark, MO 65721  
(417) 581-3093

Sunshine Animal Hospital  
3235 E Sunshine St A, Springfield, MO 65804  
(417) 889-0090

**\*\*Surf the net! When you Google "corn snakes" there is a plethora of information out there. There are also many groups on social media, such as Facebook, with some very experienced members who will be happy to answer your questions.**