

Sunbeam Snake

(*Xenopeltis unicolor*)

by Petra Spiess

The sunbeam snake (*Xenopeltis unicolor*) is native to southern China and Southeast Asia, where it is often encountered in rice paddies.

This species garners its common name from the incredible iridescence of its scales, a trait difficult to capture on film. The ground color of the snake's dorsal side is a dark brown, almost black, with the ventral side being a white or cream color. In sunlight or under strong artificial light, the scales scatter the illumination like a prism, showcasing a breathtaking display of rainbow coloration. There is probably no other snake in the world that can rival the sunbeam snake's iridescence, the species' most enchanting feature.

Description

This species should not be confused with *Loxocemus bicolor*, commonly referred to as the New World sunbeam snake or the Mexican burrowing python. *Loxocemus bicolor* is larger but very similar in color and shape, and even has similar, if less bright, iridescence.

In the wild, sunbeam snakes are totally fossorial and spend most of their time underground. Their morphology strongly reflects this lifestyle; their heads are sharply pointed with little neck delineation, enabling them to move underground with ease.

Wild sunbeam snakes eat a variety of prey, including am-

phibians, lizards, small mammals and other snakes.

Young sunbeam snakes look very similar to the adults, except that they have a vivid "collar" of white scales evident just below the head. This coloration fades within the first year.

Captive-bred sunbeam snakes are rare, so most of the ones in the pet trade are imported, wild-caught animals. Wild-caught sunbeam snakes stress very easily, and if held in improper environmental conditions, die easily. However, animals that survive importation can acclimate well if properly housed and cared for by a good reptile vet.

Care Requirements

There are really only four requirements to successfully keeping sunbeam snakes: humidity, a burrowing medium, proper temperatures and solitude. Adult sunbeam snakes average between 3 to 4 feet and can be comfortably housed in an enclosure measuring 3 feet long by 2 feet wide by 12 inches tall.

Sunbeam snakes hail from an extremely humid habitat, and they require a very high humidity (80 to 100 percent) in their enclosures to do well. Many sunbeam snakes develop a condition that looks like blistering on their scales, and although this looks similar to an illness caused by excessive humidity, it is not. If you dry out sunbeam snakes in an effort to cure this condition, they will quickly die. This is a bacterial



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infection exacerbated by stress and will disappear with correct antibiotic treatment and a humid environment. All imported sunbeam snakes need to be checked and treated for internal parasites and infections by a knowledgeable reptile vet.


Because sunbeams are fossorial animals, they need a substrate into which they can burrow. I used 6 to 8 inches of cypress mulch in my sunbeam cages, but other substrates such as moss or small reptile bark would work just as well. The mulch should be kept very moist but not wet. The snakes need to be able to thermoregulate their body temperature. The warm end of the cage should be 86 to 88 degrees Fahrenheit and the cool end 75 to 80 degrees.

Healthy sunbeam snakes readily accept freshly killed or defrosted mice from tongs. They have a strong feeding response, so watch your fingers! Sunbeam snakes constrict their prey like other snakes, but they are the fastest eaters I have ever seen. No other species can even compare to the speed at which sunbeams subdue and swallow prey.

Another notable characteristic of sunbeam snakes is their incredibly pungent musk. If you get musked by an irate sunbeam, plan on taking a shower and washing the clothes you were wearing about five times. As sunbeams stress easily, do not handle them unless it is absolutely necessary. Success with sunbeams amounts to four things: Keep them humid, buried, warm, and leave them alone.

Breeding

Very little is known about the breeding habits of sunbeam snakes. In my colony of 15 snakes, only one female ever produced eggs, but it was quite possible this female was gravid when I bought her. She was not obviously gravid at purchase, and I had repeatedly paired her with a male, but I never witnessed mating. So I'm unsure if I just got lucky or the male sunbeam did. The female laid six eggs, which were incubated in a moist vermiculite mixture at 85 degrees for 54 days.

The eggs hatched out five perfect hatchlings that readily fed on pinky mice with the same verve as their mother. Because so many wild-caught sunbeam snakes do so poorly, attempts should be made to establish more captive-bred lines of these spectacular, though somewhat reclusive snakes. Sunbeam snakes could make an exciting challenge for any herpetoculturist wanting a new project. 

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