

SUCCESSFUL BREEDING OF THE RUSSIAN RAT SNAKE



(*ELAPHE SCHRENCKI SCHRENCKI*)

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THE SNAKES

This year I bred *Elaphe schrenckii schrenckii* for the first time. The female of my breeding pair was born on July 13 1995 and bought as a juvenile in a pet store in August/September 1995. The main reason I bought her was that I had learned, from the literature available to me, that this species was ideal for beginners.

Now that I have maintained these snakes for some years I can confirm this. The female is now over 170 cm long and fully grown. I bought the male as an adult on the Snake Day in 1997.

THE TERRARIUM

I keep the female in a glass terrarium which measures 80 x 40 x 50 cm (L x W x H). For substrate I initially used only wood shavings until I learned it might cause problems with the snake's digestion. I now use a mixture of peat, sand and wood shavings. The terrarium is fitted with a 25W light bulb, a spotlight for



Elaphe schrenckii schrenckii offspring. Photo by C.A.P. van Riel

basking, a water bowl and some hiding places. During the summer the light is on for 10 hours and during the winter for 5 to 6 hours each day.

The male is kept in a terrarium that measures 60 x 50 x 40 cm (L x W x H). This terrarium is decorated similar to that of the female and contains an extra artificial plant.

BEHAVIOUR AND FEEDING

Initially I fed the female newborn mice which she ate very well. I did not hibernate her in her first year. I did observe that she went into a semi-resting period for about four weeks. I have never noticed this with my corn snakes.

The snake sloughed regularly and grew rapidly. Currently I feed my snakes two live mice that I offer using feeding forceps. My snakes do however accept dead mice. I have noticed that they can be quite aggressive during feeding.

BREEDING

When I obtained an adult male *Elaphe schrenckii schrenckii* on the 1997 Snake Day I decided to attempt to breed these snakes. In September I started by slowly decreasing the photoperiod. After about one month the female only accepted small mice and later she stopped feeding completely. On November 1st I switched off the light in her terrarium. I sprayed it with water and covered the glass with black plastic.

The newly acquired male I continued to feed for a couple of weeks. I also gave him a worm

treatment. On November 9th I also switched off the light in his terrarium and covered the glass. On Sunday November 16th I put the female in a Styrofoam box which contained a layer of moist peat of about two inches. I then placed the box under the floor of my house where it is a constant 11 °C. This in my opinion is a good alternative for anybody, like me, who has no special room where the animals can be cooled down. One week later I put the male in a separate Styrofoam box and also placed it under the floor.

On January 31st 1998 I took the snakes from their Styrofoam boxes and placed them back in their terraria. I then slowly increased the photo period. On February 3rd they both accepted an adult mouse. A few days later I placed the male with the female. The female sloughed on February 25th and the male on March 3rd. I observed a copulation on March 14th. One week after this copulation I separated the animals.

The female sloughed again on April 1st. I noticed that she drank more often and could often be found basking under the lamp. On April 8th she refused to eat for the first time and on April 12th she laid twelve eggs in a plastic box filled with a layer of peat. The eggs were incubated "Au bain Marie" at a temperature of 27-28 °C and a relative humidity of 100%.

THE NEONATES

The first egg hatched on May 19th and the rest soon followed. I placed the young separately in small microwave boxes. The first neonate sloughed on May 28th and the others on May 29th, 30th and 31st. The day after the first





slough I offered each a dead newborn mouse. Most accepted it readily, and others did so the following day. One young refused to eat and had to be force-fed.

The neonates are very quick and continuously try to escape. Their average length is 44 cm's and after their first meal they weighed about 18 grams. I did not determine the sex of the young because I do not know enough about the methods used to do that. Therefore I decided to wait until someone with more knowledge and experience can help me. This also prevents the possibility that I harm the neonates by my incompetence.

CONCLUSION

Elaphe schrenckii schrenckii is a snake species that is very easy to keep. They pose little difficulty in breeding and feeding. It is therefore a very good species to start with.

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