

A Guide to Feeding Corn Snakes

(Also applicable to Kingsnakes & Hognose Snakes.)

Introduction

This is a brief guide to feeding corn and other snakes. It is especially useful for ideas to tempt hatchlings to begin feeding and to re-establish feeding in young snakes that have stopped. This guide is not intended to be totally comprehensive as there are many strategies that can be used. It does, however, outline the methods used at British Herpetological Supply where all the feeding snakes that have been sold will have been fed following these principles. (We do not sell non feeding snakes except where specifically advertised as such and offered on that condition.)

There are a few general points that should be considered when attempting to encourage hatchling and other snakes to feed. These include:

Housing Baby Snakes

- House the snake individually. This eliminates disturbance and competition from cage mates. In an environment on its own, the young snake can quickly establish a familiarity with its surroundings.
- Small enclosures are best, as these tend to suppress the anxiety caused by exposure and the lack of tactile stimuli. Specimens accustomed to the captive environment will be less susceptible to this anxiety and in time, tame animals will feed under almost any conditions. When feeding normally, the snake can be moved into more spacious surroundings.
- In respect of the snake's desire to feel secure, hides and retreats are essential. Most snakes like the feeling of being concealed within a tight space. Technically, they prefer the tactile stimulation of more than just their belly surface being in contact with the ground. Even tree snakes used to the comparative exposure of life in the branches, seek this comfort as juveniles.
- Until it has accustomed itself with its new surroundings, including a new owner, the temptation to handle a new pet snake must be resisted. Not only does the physical disturbance contribute to the anxiety experienced by a young snake, the chemicals present in small amounts on the hands create strange smells. These will in time be accepted but for the moment, are best avoided.
- To isolate the animal still further it is recommended that the housing be protected from as much disturbance as possible. Darkness or at least subdued lighting is advised, so cover all transparent parts of the enclosure with screens like paper curtains. Vibration is also a major stimuli sensed by snakes. To cut down on anything unnecessary, the enclosure should be sited in some quiet location away from people walking past and certainly away from radios and the like playing music etc.
- The baby snake should be quite warm and a temperature of about 28°C is considered to be the minimum. The snake should have been at this temperature for at least a couple of days prior to an attempted feeding

As far as the preparation of food and its presentation are concerned, again a few general principles should be followed.

Food Presentation.

- Thaw the frozen rodent pinkies in warm water and then pat them dry with clean paper towel or tissue.
- Do not thaw the rodent pinkies with any other foods that may be destined for other animals. This will keep the smell of the food as uncontaminated as possible.
- Of course, do not contaminate the food with strange smells like detergents, tobacco and nicotine or anything else. Clean, washed and well rinsed hands or even plastic gloves will prevent cross contamination.
- In some circumstances, the removal of scents may induce feeding and to this end washing the pink with a non scented detergent, followed by a very thorough rinsing and drying has worked.
- The defrosted pinkies should be offered warm. Resting the dried pinkie on the corner of a heat mat may help here or any neutrally smelling warm surface would do.
- Select out the smallest 'pinks' and offer these.
- The time of feeding should fit into the natural activity cycle of the animal and as they are usually active at dawn and dusk, the late afternoon or early evening would suit. Try to disturb the snake as little as possible and just place the warm defrosted pinkie, head first, by the snake's nose. Leave the snake undisturbed until the next morning and only then check to see if the meal has been accepted.

All of this sets the scene for normal feeding. In 90% of cases the snake will have fed and can be gradually weaned onto a more interactive feeding schedule. In the remaining 10% or so of stubborn feeders, a couple more identical attempts should be tried. If this also fails, then a change from a feeding state to one of nonfeeding has occurred. The causes can be speculated about but the concern of most owners will be to trigger the feeding response back into action.

It is obvious that the majority of snakes will want to feed, whether they recognise the food being offered to them is another matter. The two sections above on housing baby snakes and presenting the food will answer most questions. Answering the rest will often be a case of diminishing returns.

In the wild the young snake may well eat live rodent pinkies it happens upon in the course of its hunting. Feeding live vertebrate food in captivity is very controversial and should be carefully considered. Feeding such food could end up with the person feeding the snake with a live pinkie being prosecuted for causing cruelty to the rodent. On the other hand the courts may deem the snake was in need of food and the live pinkie was the only natural food it would accept. The court records are of no help as both successful prosecutions and defences have occurred. As these were in the magistrates' courts, no precedence is set and the situation remains unclear. Our

advice is that live vertebrate food is *not* suitable for pet snakes and should *not* be used. Animals that do not feed using the techniques outlined in this leaflet should be passed on to an experienced snake keeper who may be able to persuade the snake to resume eating.

Tempting Difficult Feeders

- The first consideration will be to establish as near to an ideal environment as possible. This will mean getting the temperature and to a lesser extent, humidity ranges correct. The heating and ventilation systems in operation over the course of the day will see to this. The lighting system will, of course, control the levels and quality of the illumination and should be coupled to coincide with the heating. Other physical parameters like the provision of hides; retreats and substrate texture complete the obvious material aspects of the environment.
- On the other hand, confining the snake with a meal in a confined space, like a cricket tub and left overnight has also worked.
- The position a snake senses itself in its seasonal cycle may also cause it not to feed. A snake approaching hibernation will not feed; as to enter a cold dormant period with a full gut could spell disaster. Seasonal triggers are complicated and often follow on from one to another but sometimes just cooling the snake off for a few weeks and then warming it up again may restart feeding. Seek advice if this course of action is contemplated.
- Fresh clean drinking water and a chemically inert nature to the rest of the enclosure should take care of the other considerations.
- Recognising food is somewhat more problematic. Most species have an acceptable range of food species that may vary slightly from one individual to another. The food preference may also change as the animal matures but also from season to season. Targeting the right food is a matter of informed judgement and experience. Corn snakes and other pet snakes are chosen as pets because of their preference for rodent pinkies. Sometime swapping from mice to rats may work. Be more careful of swapping to hamsters or gerbils as this could lead to an expensive habit at best and an unobtainable one at worst. Opening the head of the pinkie is an unpleasant but often successful way of increasing its appeal. A single cut into the head to release some of the tissue is all that may be necessary. Repeated freezing and thawing has also worked, as has almost cooking the pinkie between two heat mats.
- Scenting the pinkies with an additional scent sometimes works. Rubbing the food with a defrosted chick or surprisingly, canned tuna are examples that have worked.

As a word of warning, do not attempt to force a nonfeeding snake by pushing food down its throat. Some experienced people are able to pass food into the gullet of a snake without causing harm but this dangerous technique is best left to them.

Sometimes it is not possible to resume feeding without professional help. If all else fails it may be as well to assume that something is seriously wrong with the animal and a more professional examination is called for. Take the snake, along with all the notes of what has been tried, to a reptile expert for examination. The snake cannot go too long without a meal so be sensible in deciding what instruction to give and what your eventual attitude will be.