

Why be Bitten?

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Sensible housing and handling tips make bites from emerald tree boas and green tree pythons less likely.

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Introduction

This article will cover the basic techniques recommended to safely handle both Emerald Tree Boas (*Corallus caninus*) and Green Tree Pythons (*Morelia viridis*). Both of these species have earned a reputation of being both aggressive and difficult to maintain. In my experience both of these presumptions are unwarranted and can be overcome with the proper handling techniques.



In nature, both species share similar ecological niches and therefore have similar captive care requirements. Being arboreal they spend nearly all day draped around branches of trees and shrubs. They are nocturnal predators and are best left alone once the lights have gone out. If properly approached, both species can be successfully handled during the day with limited risk of being bitten.

Enclosures

Thanks to the advances in herpetoculture in recent years there are now a wide variety of enclosures that are well suited to the needs of these species during all life stages. I will not address the pros and cons of each brand of enclosure but will cover some basic designs that should be taken into consideration when choosing an enclosure for one of these species.

In our experience both of these species do best when housed individually, although some keepers do prefer to maintain pairs or trios (One male with two females) together. It is essential to avoid housing multiple males of either species in the same enclosure as serious injury can occur due to combat.

The first consideration of the enclosure is height. The height of the enclosure for any size animal should not be more than two-thirds the length of the snake. This will allow the animal to comfortably drape from the highest perch and still reach the bottom of the enclosure to access food or water. Horizontal space is far more useful than vertical space when considering the activity patterns of these snakes. After nightfall, these animals become active and spend their time crawling through the trees moving from branch to branch. Very seldom do they need to descend to the ground during their travels.

The second and probably most important consideration is perch attachment within the enclosure. Perches need to be well anchored for the animals to feel secure while resting on them. We have found the best method to ensure a stable perch is with the use of brackets

mounted to the sides of the enclosure. Perches are then cut to fit snugly between the brackets. Our enclosures incorporate plastic brackets that are designed for holding closet dowels. These offer the convenience of being able to vary the perch diameters to meet the needs of the individual snakes. They also allow the animal to be removed from the enclosure while it is still resting on the perch. Many enclosure manufacturers offer various options to mount perches within their enclosures.

Another thing to consider when deciding on an enclosure is access. In nature most predators attack their prey from above. Most animals become nervous when approached from above and this is one thing that can trigger a defensive response in your snake. When choosing an enclosure you

should consider one that provides horizontal access. Such an enclosure reduces the potential for defensive responses and thus any negative interaction between keeper and snake.

A Safe Approach

How you approach your snake will determine the snake's response to your attempt to handle it. If the snake feels uncomfortable or threatened then the experience will be a negative one for the snake (and probably you too). The goal is to make the interaction between you and the snake as positive an experience as possible.

For this reason it is important to note that you should never grasp the snake behind the head when attempting to handle it! There are times when this type of restraint may be necessary but routine handling should not be one of them.

The temperament of each animal will vary depending on its individual personality and its previous experiences while being handled. Wild collected animals or animals that have passed through many hands may have accumulated many negative experiences. This negative imprinting must be overcome, and it may take weeks, months or even years in some cases. Of course there are certain individuals that may never become accustomed to being handled but these are the exception rather than the rule.



Most enclosures can be fitted with this type of perch holder. Plastic closet rod holders such as this are available at most home improvement stores.



Approaching the snake from below is the least threatening.

The best approach is to remain calm and deliberate in your movements regardless of how the animal reacts. If you display nervous or apprehensive behavior this will make the snake feel uncomfortable and cause it to become defensive.

Handling

We have found the best way to begin an interaction session with a snake is to remove the perch with the animal resting on it from the enclosure. The initial movement of the perch will alert and perhaps awaken the animal and allow it to recognize that further interactions may be forthcoming. This slight motion

should not be enough to aggravate the animal as motions of this type would be common in a natural environment.

Once you have removed the animal and its perch from the enclosure it is best to approach the snake from below with your free hand. Approaching from below will be a far less threatening than approaching from above. Gently support the lower coils of the snake and allow it to begin leaving the perch voluntarily. Raise the coils with your hand as it begins to leave the perch. Never pull the snake from its perch but instead offer it another secure perching location to which it can safely travel. As the snake begins to make the move from its enclosure perch to your hand you can begin to move the enclosure perch slightly making the animal feel as though its new perch, your hand, is more stable. This will encourage the snake to begin crawling and leave its old perch behind. At this point you have safely removed the snake from its enclosure.



Getting a chondro or emerald to this level of comfort during handling may take weeks, months or even years in some cases. The rewards are well worth the time and effort.

Once the snake is awake and active it will become inquisitive and want to explore its surroundings. It is at this point that you should allow the animal to freely crawl through your open hands. Now you can enjoy and appreciate the full beauty that these animals possess. Do not attempt to restrain or physically grasp the snake as this will immediately cause it to feel threatened and become defensive. Remember, you want this to be a positive experience for both of you.

Some keepers feel more comfortable wearing gloves during the initial handling sessions. Although we do not advocate this type of approach we certainly understand the reasoning behind doing so. Both of these species have large teeth that can inflict a painful bite. If you do choose to use gloves at first be sure to wear fairly tight fitting gloves that still allow you to feel and interpret the animal's movements. Heavy "welding" type gloves may provide the handler more security but what you gain in security you lose in dexterity and control, which can add to the snake's uneasiness.

Return to the Enclosure

After you have completed the handling session you will need to return the animal to its enclosure. This is also an opportunity for the session to become a negative experience. Because of the arboreal nature of these animals, an enclosure with horizontal access will make returning the snake to its enclosure much easier. You can simply open the door and allow the animal to crawl back into its enclosure as if it were moving to a new perch naturally. Enclosures with access from above become more difficult as the



Personality is an individual trait and cannot be assigned to any locality. Here a green tree python of the Biak locality type is easily handled.

animals naturally attempt to move back up and out to find a suitable resting place.

When returning animals to a vertically accessed enclosure it will be necessary to block their exit from the enclosure. This can be done with an open flat palm, or some other object such as the enclosure lid, placed directly in front of the animal as it tries to leave the enclosure. You may need to continue to encourage the later portion of the animal to return to the enclosure by gently touching its ventral side. Once the animal has returned to the enclosure allow it time to settle back in and find a comfortable resting position.

Conclusion

As mentioned previously it is important to make each handling session as positive an experience as possible. With animals that have had numerous negative experiences it may be necessary to simply remove the animals while on their perch and return them to the enclosure without ever handling them. This type of positive experience will decrease the animals nervous and defensive responses. Eventually you will be able to begin removing the animal from its perch and enjoying the full experience of owning these fascinating snakes.

Because of their beauty and striking colors emerald tree boas and green tree pythons have been popular terrarium animals for many years. Unfortunately, they have not reached their full potential within the hobby due to the belief that nearly all animals remain aggressive. Our experiences gathered over the past 25 years have led us to realize that these animals are not deserving of this reputation. With patience and the proper handling techniques these snakes can become as fully enjoyable as any of the more commonly kept species.

It is my hope that more people will overcome their fears and begin to appreciate these animals for their full potential. The wide array of colors and patterns along with their small size make them excellent display specimens for well planted naturalistic enclosures. Their beauty combined with the gentle nature that can be developed over time will make them well suited to become two of the most popular snakes in captivity.



Things Not to do with Emeralds and Chondros!

Never forcibly remove an animal from its perch. This is especially important with juvenile green tree pythons as their vertebra are very delicate and can be easily damaged. This type of damage can cause permanent kinks which can lead to decreased mobility and muscle control. Regardless whether motor control is affected, the spine will never return to its natural state.

Do not attempting to handle an animal after dark. At this time the animals are naturally active and searching for prey. Any motion with a heat signature can be mistaken as a prey item. Bites from a feeding response can be far more forceful and painful than defensive bites. A bite from any snake should be properly cleaned and treated. Such puncture wounds can become infected.

Don't house animals in enclosures that are too tall. Many animals will not travel to the bottom of an enclosure to find water. Unless an elevated water source is provided this can result in animals becoming dehydrated, weakening the immune system, and causing them to become more easily irritated.

Don't making rapid or sudden movements. This is common with all living things and usually results in defensive behavior.

