

***Rhagerhis moilensis* egg incubation and care for juvenile snakes**

This year we got an adult pair of *Rhagerhis moilensis*, long-term captive animals, originating from Sharjah Zoo, UAE. Some 14 days after their arrival in June, the female laid 6 relatively good looking eggs and two unfertilized eggs. Since the species is still rare in captivity and successful breeding rarer still, I'm sharing our experience with egg incubation and care for juvenile snakes.

Egg incubation:

The eggs were laid in the end of June. After two days it was already possible to shine through them with a lamp to check if they are fertilized or not. All eggs were fertilized, but three eggs got moldy after a good month, meaning that the developing embryos died. The reason why is unknown, but we lost mostly the eggs with less calcified shells.

We incubated the eggs in a standard styropore box with aquarium water heater on temperatures 26-28°C and 80-90% air humidity. For the substrate we used vermiculite. Incubation period was somewhere between 55 and 60 days with the juveniles hatching in the end of August.



Juvenile snakes care and housing:

The juveniles were kept separately in small plastic boxes, some 18x15x10 cm big, same as we usually use for all juveniles born at our place. We used paper towels for bedding when they were born, but since they looked comfortable with it, we still keep them in the same way since there is less chance for them to eat something they shouldn't and relatively easy to clean. For heating we use 15W cable, placed under one side of the box, which provides temperatures 20°C on the cold part and 25-35°C on warm part. They remain active for the most of the day but rest on the warmer part of the box.

Feeding and growth:

At birth they measured about 17 cm. They shed for the first time some 10 to 14 days after birth and a week or so after that they start feeding. Two started feeding without any help, but one needed one assist-feeding and started eating without help since then. Due to their

small size at first they take very small pinkies, because normally even newborn pinkies are too big, so we simply cut a dead pinky into pieces and leave them in the box with the juveniles. While a whole pinky is sometimes too big to swallow, they manage to eat all the pieces of a single pinky without problems. Second shedding took place when the juveniles were a month and a half old.

When two months old, they measure about 25 cm and can already feed on whole pinkies. While mostly fed with live food they take dead food equally well. They take both, house mice pinkies and African soft-furred rat (*Mastomys natalensis*) pinkies, but they individually prefer one or the other type.

Determining sex is not as difficult as with other Psammophid species since they seem to exhibit colour dimorphism to some extent. Males have darker pattern and larger blotches while the females are more lightly coloured. More keepers have confirmed to have such color dimorphism with their animals as well. After the juveniles' second shedding it is already possible to approximately know their sex.

Behaviour:

Newborn animals are skittish, so they hood and hiss a lot and will occasionally bite. The bite is painless and without any effects, but they can draw blood. After a few days with regular contact with people (seeing people is enough, no need for actual handling) they stop hooding and hissing and will only do so occasionally when they see something new they find disturbing (like a cat). They are very inquisitive and curious creatures from a very early age and will follow everything that is going on near them. After two months of age they become so tame, that they don't mind people looking at them while they eat (which is a big problem with some other snakes we keep) and let themselves being carefully handled without any fear of sudden escapes. While they already seem to behave differently when meeting known people or strangers, they don't have as strong reactions to strangers as adults.



Written by Erika Ostanek and Tomaz Jagar