

In Trouble Over Snake Death

By Russ Case

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It may be true that constrictors will fast on occasion, but if your snake hasn't eaten for months something may be wrong. Photo by Bill Love. I just read an article on the Hartlepool Mail website about a Hartlepool, England, resident who was given a boa constrictor last year by a friend. The snake refused to eat for several months, from June to September. I have heard of large constrictors that can go a long time without eating; there have even been tales of big ones that have gone a year without eating. I'm not sure if they're true or not, but personally, I would never assume a snake is okay if it's gone for many months without eating, especially if it was being warmed as this one was, with heat mats and ceramic heaters. If a snake isn't eating for a long time I recommend veterinary attention because a snake that is not eating is often a sign that something is wrong.

The snake's previous owner subscribed to the "snakes can go a year without eating" theory and apparently led his friend to believe that this was normal. So even after his new pet hadn't eaten for several months the boa's owner was not alarmed, and he did not take the snake to a veterinarian.

In a way that the article doesn't make clear, the RSPCA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) got wind of the situation and came to the man's house. They found the snake mostly unresponsive and removed it. It was taken to a veterinarian where fluids were administered, as well as a bath. However, the snake died the next day. It reportedly was "dehydrated, cold and suffered kidney failure." It is stated in the article that the snake's enclosure was heated with both a ceramic heat element and a heat mat. Maybe they weren't turned on.

After the snake died a court case resulted, and the snake's owner pleaded guilty to animal abuse charges. He had to pay a variety of fines, including a £15 "victim surcharge." In addition to paying the fines he was banned from keeping any pets for 15 years. As it turned out he had had previous legal problems involving pets, and in 2003 was banned from keeping pets for two years after he left four bulldogs in his house for four days without any water.

Remember, whenever you bring a pet home, you are responsible for its life. Sometimes an animal may need to be taken to a veterinarian, and this costs money. Many people don't want to spend the money and prefer to see if the animal gets better on its own. The thing is, by the time an animal shows illness, especially a reptile or a bird, the illness may be quite advanced and it may be too late to save it. Animals by nature hide their illness, because if a wild animal appears weaker than the others it will become a target for predation or other unpleasant alternatives.

It's hard to denounce people who truly can't afford to take their pets to a veterinarian. But if you can't, consider not getting a pet in the first place. In my opinion, people like the guy described above just shouldn't have pets to begin with.

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