

## Regal Reticulated Pythons

### **Tips to safely handle, tame and train reticulated pythons.**

*Text and photos by Kevin McCurley*

The thrill of interacting with a large, tame reticulated python is hard to describe; you truly appreciate their gentle disposition. Although it's easy to become enamored with the sheer size and power of an adult retic, as conscientious keepers we must never forget that these giants command the utmost respect and responsibility. It takes careful consideration, time, energy and resources to raise these serpent gems into giants, but the rewards can be measured in feet.

#### Size Matters

The reticulated python (*Python reticulatus*) is the longest-growing python species. Captive specimens may exceed 20 feet under the care of a dedicated keeper. The common variety under adequate care may range in size from an 8-foot-long, sexually mature male to a 14- to 16-foot female. Their size potential is incredible, and a 2-foot neonate retic can sprout to an impressive 10 feet or more in 12 months with heavy feeding. We at New England Reptile Distributors encourage prospective keepers to give this serious thought before buying a retic.

Several insular forms of the reticulated python seem to remain smaller, relatively speaking, than their mainland counterparts. These "dwarf" types may be suitable for keepers who anticipate caring for a midsized constrictor. Smaller dwarf forms, such as super dwarfs and Jampea, Selayar and Honey island dwarfs, can range in size from a sexually mature 4- to 5-foot male to reproductive females reaching 6 to 10 feet on average. It is believed these locality-specific animals have adapted to the limitations of an island environment.

#### Beyond the Hype

Retics are notorious for their strong personalities. We've heard them described as "psycho," a description frequently exaggerated by those who have never kept the species. This misunderstanding comes from a reputation primarily built upon the antics of wild-caught retics. The reality lies in many factors, including the snake's history and how it has been treated.

First and foremost, reticulated pythons are predators, and this plays heavily into the natural behavior of the species. Secondly, these snakes are smart. In fact, they may be the kings of intelligence among constrictors. Retics recognize their keepers and remember negative experiences.

Wild retics are primarily collected for their skins; relatively few wild-caught pythons make it into the pet trade as imports. The treatment they receive after being collected and readied for skinning is often abhorrent. Retics tend to remember the mistreatment they've endured, so by the time one ends up on a dealer's table at a reptile expo, it is often frightened and defensive. At this point the snake may rely on its only defense: biting and thrashing while seeking an escape. Such specimens are best left to experienced snakekeepers.

#### Retic Psychology

Don't plan on keeping retics unless you first understand the dynamics of their behavior. If a reticulated python bites or acts aggressively, it does so because it fears a factor in its environment, its keeper included. It is the keeper's responsibility to earn the snake's trust. Seemingly always hungry, retics are designed to eat. They have fast metabolisms and may grow quickly. The more you feed the snake, the more it will grow. Less food means slower growth and a smaller snake. Retics always seem to be on the prowl for food, and it's the keeper's responsibility to teach them when, where and what to eat.

Hatchling and juvenile retics tend to be very defensive because they are low on the food chain. From their perspective, everything bigger is a potential predator that wants to eat them, and it is important to be aware of this mind-set when working with them.

If you have the opportunity to work with an experienced reticulated python keeper, we highly recommend you do so before acquiring a retic. Mentorship from a skilled snake handler will help you learn what to expect from a retic of your own.

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