

Animal stranglers

Constrictor snakes wrap themselves around their prey, squeeze tight and wait for it to die of suffocation, writes **Ellen Whyte**

Snakes that smother

Snakes are unusual because they can eat animals bigger than themselves. They can do this because they have very special jaws and heads.

The bones in a snake's jaws and head are not solid like ours. Their bones are linked by muscles and soft tissue. This means snakes can stretch their jaws and skulls. By opening its mouth really wide, a snake can swallow prey bigger than its own head.

Snakes swallow quite slowly. They prefer it when their victims don't struggle. Some snakes keep their prey still by poisoning them. Others strangle their prey. Snakes that strangle are called constrictors.

Constrictors wrap themselves around their prey's chest. As the animal breathes out, the constrictor tightens its grip. With each breath, the prey gets less air until it suffocates. When the prey has suffocated, the snake eats it.

Most wild constrictors avoid people. But pet constrictors like being with people.

If you handle a pet constrictor, remember always to support it properly while you're stroking it. If the snake feels in danger, it will wrap itself around you. If it does, and it squeezes too hard, unwrap the snake gently, starting at the tail.

True or false?

- 1 Snakes can stretch their jaws and skull.
- 2 Constrictor snakes crush their victims.
- 3 To unwrap a constrictor, start with the tail.

Fab fact!

One of the smallest constricting snakes is the rubber boa from North America. It is 30cm long and eats mice, baby birds and lizards

Fab fact!

All snakes are carnivorous reptiles. Unlike their relatives the lizards, snakes don't have legs. There are more than 2,900 species of snake. They live everywhere, except Antarctica, Ireland, Iceland and New Zealand

The Burmese python

Fill in the gaps with the following words: *carnivorous, underwater, rare, protected*

Burmese pythons live in southeast Asian rainforests. They are common in some countries and _____ in others. Those that live in Hong Kong are _____.

Young wild Burmese pythons love hanging in trees. Adults stay mostly on the ground.

Burmese pythons are also good swimmers.

They can stay _____ for up to 30 minutes.

Burmese pythons are _____. They eat birds and mammals. Small Burmese pythons eat mice, baby birds and eggs.

Bigger ones eat rats, chickens, ducks and rabbits. Really big ones will eat goats, deer and wild boar.

These reptiles can grow very large. A Burmese python in the US called Baby grew to 8.23 metres long and weighed 183kg.

Constrictors in Hong Kong

The Burmese python lives in forests all over Hong Kong. Look for babies in the trees and adults on the ground. Wild Burmese pythons are protected, so don't touch them or try to pick them up. When you see one, stand back and take a photograph.

If you visit a pet shop, you will see that snakes are graceful, beautiful pets. But they need very special care. Snakes need expensive food and very large cages. You might also need to visit a zoo vet if your pet becomes ill. Snakes can be very expensive and difficult to look after.

If you think you want a pet snake, visit the Hong Kong Reptile and Amphibian Society for advice first.

They also have plenty of animals up for adoption. You can find them online at hkrs.org.

Boa constrictor

Find the antonyms – the opposites – of the following words: *outside, normal, set in their ways*

Boa constrictors live in Central America, South America and some islands in the Caribbean. They are very adaptable. Boas live in forests, grasslands, and even in houses in the city.

Boas eat mammals and birds. The bigger the boa, the bigger the prey. Small boas eat rats and chickens. But the ones that grow up to 4 metres long can eat deer.

Like all reptiles, baby boas are born from eggs. But boas give birth in an unusual way.

A mother boa keeps the eggs inside her body until they hatch. She then gives birth to live young. This type of reproduction is called ovoviviparity (oh-voh-VEE-veh-PAR-it-ee).

Other animals that give birth in the same way include great white sharks, coelacanths and guppies.

Fab fact!

Boa constrictors eat about five or six times a week. They survive on less than one meal a day

The green anaconda

Find words that mean:

intelligent, looks out for, very big, lie in wait for

Green anacondas live in wetlands in the north of South America. They can grow up to 10 metres long and can weigh up to 250kg. Anacondas live for about 25 years.

Green anacondas are very clever hunters. Although they are big and fast, they like to ambush their prey.

Anacondas lie in the water and wait for animals to come for a drink. When the anaconda sees something it likes, it throws itself out of the water, and wraps its body around its prey. It then squeezes hard and waits for the animal to suffocate.

Anacondas eat birds. But they also eat capybara, giant rodents that weigh up to 65kg, local crocodiles called caimans, and deer. Anacondas have even been seen catching and suffocating horses.

PHOTOS: OLIVER TSANG, IRA CHAPLAIN, REUTERS



Snakes alive!

The terms describing reptile confusing. Here are the definitions:
1 Oviparous means the female lays eggs that hatch after laying.
2 Viviparous means the female does not develop enclosed eggs at birth to live young.
3 Ovoviviparous means that the females develop and keep the eggs within their bodies, and the babies hatch from the eggs inside the mother.