

Captive Care of Monocled Cobras

Naja kaouthia

by

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General disclaimer: I do not now and never have kept any cobras. Unfortunately, the people who do keep these impressive animals are all too busy to write this article. So, on the repeated advice that keeping kaouthia is much the same as keeping Corn Snakes, I have undertaken to write a coherent beginner's guide to keeping *Naja kaouthia*. I hope that you find it helpful.

While this article is specifically aimed at kaouthia, the general care issues should apply fairly well to all (non-spitting) Asian cobras.

First and foremost, no matter how cute they are as babies/neonates, *Naja kaouthia* are deadly venomous snakes that can kill you. They must be treated with the respect that they deserve. That one minute that you fail to give them your undivided attention could be the last minute you are not fighting for your life. Obviously, this makes them slightly different from Corn Snakes.

Natural history: *Naja kaouthia* are the typical Asian cobra, the Monocled (or Monocellate) or Suphan Cobra is found throughout Southeast Asia and Northern India. Common around rice paddies and grain fields where their common foods of frogs, fish and rats can be found. They are one of the leading culprits of venomous bites in that region of the world as their predilection for inhabiting areas surrounding cultivated fields brings them in constant contact with human beings.

Size: Neonates may be as small as 5 inches while adults may range from 3 feet to 7.5 feet.

Captive management: One of the easiest of the cobras to keep as far as requirements are concerned. Some individuals are very unpredictable; while others are relatively mellow of temperament, preferring to bluff and hiss. They are elapids and are relatively quick moving as opposed to most of the pit vipers and old world vipers. Hooking is variable with individual specimens but overall kaouthia are not difficult to manage on a hook or hook and tail quite calmly. They are known for hooding easily and bluffing attacks while emitting an astoundingly loud hiss. They are often curious about their surroundings and things going on within their view. They are reported to be very aggressive feeders, delivering several bites to prey items and sometimes even holding on to the prey item. Captive bred animals, as in all species, are a preferable source of stock, with the normal black or brown

color phase being widely available as well as the stunning albino variety featuring a pearlescent white base color and orange/pink/lavender markings.

Housing: Often people underestimate the size of enclosure required for these animals. They grow to become fairly large and robust snakes. They quickly outgrow the smaller sweaterboxes that juveniles are often kept in and will eventually require a cage of at least 4 feet long X 2 feet deep X 2.5 feet high (roughly the size of a 4 foot Neodesha cage). It should be lockable, as should all venomous snake enclosures. A basking shelf directly beneath the heat lamp may prove to be beneficial as these snakes are prone to climb, burrow and explore. A hide box is essential to the well-being of most captive snakes and these cobras are no exception. Artificial plants may also be helpful, as they will give the animal an alternate place to hide and feel safe. These cobras like to soak and so a large water dish should be available at all times. This will also help to maintain the 70% - 80% humidity at which kaouthia thrive. It should be noted that they seem to defecate in the water most of the time, so regular water changes are a must. Heat should be provided by basking lamp with the basking area temperature of ~95F. A gradient must be provided to allow the animal to thermoregulate. The “cool side” temp of ~75F is appropriate. Substrate varies with the preferences of the keeper. Potting soil, coco bark, cypress or aspen mulch- or my favorite, newspaper, are all acceptable substrates. Remember to never use pine or cedar shavings or mulch as they may produce aromatic oils which will be harmful to your snake’s respiratory system.

Feeding: Fortunately, these big snakes are easy to feed. In their native habitat, they have been observed to take rodents, birds, eggs, snakes, lizards, fish, frogs and toads. Juveniles in the wild are mainly lizard and frog eaters. In captivity, they will readily accept appropriately sized mice, rats, guinea pigs, hamsters, gerbils, birds (chicken chicks) and fish. It is recommended to feed nonliving prey animals (frozen/thawed mice, etc). If juveniles refuse appropriately sized mice, scenting with lizards such as geckos is often enough to get them started. By “appropriately sized”, I mean that the food item should be roughly the diameter of the snake and certainly no more than 1.5 times the diameter of the snake. Offering food should be done with long reaching tweezers or tongs. Remember that these are aggressive feeders and that their rush towards food could prove fatal to you.

Breeding: These cobras may or may not respond to a cooling down period. They do seem to favor a “wet period” which would coincide with the way seasonal changes are noted in their native areas. Frequent mistings can approximate a “rainy season” from October through January. Eggs are

normally laid between 2 and 3 months after mating and depending on incubation temperatures will hatch out between 45 and 60 days after being laid. HATCHLINGS ARE COMPLETELY FUNCTIONAL VENOMOUS SNAKES! Hatchlings can range from 5 to 12 inches at birth and should not be offered food until after their first shed, which should occur 2 to 10 days after hatching.

References: There are several sources to get information on the keeping and breeding of Corn Snakes. Keeping and breeding cobras is an entirely different matter!

Richard Mastebroek has an excellent site dedicated to the keeping and breeding of elapids, which covers various forms of cobra including kaouthia.
<http://www.kingsnake.com/elapids>

Wolfgang Wüster has an excellent page describing the systematics of venomous snakes including the Asian Cobras.

<http://sbsweb.bangor.ac.uk/~bss166/Taxa/AsNaja.htm>

This article is based on conversations with breeders, various web searches, and in some small part, personal observations and has been reviewed for proper content by venomous keepers who maintain collections including cobras.