REPTILE CARE GUIDE | UNITED STATES

Western Hognose Snake

Heterodon nasicus | Practical owner guide | Habitat, feeding, bathing, safety, health and costs

A small, burrowing snake with a distinctive upturned snout and bold defensive displays. It needs a dry, well-ventilated home, deep digging substrate and careful handling.



Illustrative species photograph

15-page guide | For prospective and current keepers

1. Species Overview and Commitment

Adult size	Typical lifespan	Natural behavior
Males often about 14-24 in; females can be larger, often 24-36 in	Often 10-20 years in captivity with good care	Diurnal, terrestrial and fossorial; burrows and uses loose soil

Western hognose snakes are native to North American plains and sandy or open habitats. Their upturned snout helps them dig. When frightened they may hiss, flatten the neck, bluff-strike, or play dead. These are defensive displays, not signs that they need to be provoked or handled more.

- Set aside time for daily equipment and water checks and periodic cleaning.
- Have a secure adult-sized enclosure, frozen-thawed prey storage, a reptile vet and an emergency plan.
- Understand that this is a rear-fanged, mildly venomous species; rules and risk tolerance matter.

Never encourage hooding, bluffing, biting or death-feigning for entertainment. Give the snake a quiet retreat.

2. Is This Snake a Good Fit?

A western hognose may suit a prepared keeper who can provide a dry, well-ventilated habitat, safe whole-prey meals, deep digging substrate, and calm observation. It is not a cuddly pet and may be defensive, especially when young or stressed.

• Do not select one because it is advertised as “harmless.” It has rear teeth and saliva that can cause a bite reaction in some people.

• It is not a suitable handling animal for unsupervised children or anyone who is uncomfortable managing a defensive snake.

• Check state, county and city rules before purchase. Local policies differ, especially for species described as venomous or rear-fanged.

• Choose captive-bred stock and verify documented feeding history; obtain the breeder/rescue records and exact species identification.

3. Choosing a Healthy Snake

Ask for hatch date, sex if known, feeding records, prey type and size, shed record, source and veterinary history. Ask whether it reliably accepts frozen-thawed prey.

• Look for clear eyes outside shed, smooth skin, normal rounded body, clean vent and quiet breathing.

• Avoid nasal bubbles or mucus, wheezing, open-mouth breathing, mouth redness, wounds, swelling, burns, mites, retained shed or severe thinness.

• Use a secure ventilated carrier for transport. Keep the animal separated from other reptiles during quarantine and use separate tools.

Book an initial check with a reptile-experienced veterinarian soon after adoption, particularly if the source or parasite history is uncertain.

4. Enclosure and Burrowing Substrate

Adult males can often use a secure enclosure around 36 x 18 x 18 in (90 x 45 x 45 cm); many females need more floor space. Provide enough length for full extension and more space when feasible. Use a locking, escape-proof enclosure.

• Provide 3-4 inches or more of safe, dry digging substrate such as aspen or an appropriate soil/sand mix; avoid dusty, scented or sharp materials.

• Add two snug hides, one on the warm side and one on the cool side, plus clutter, cork and low stable branches.

• Keep heavy decorations from shifting or collapsing when the snake burrows. Check gaps around doors, vents and cables.

• Avoid cedar and pine shavings and damp, mold-prone bedding.

5. Heat, Humidity and Light

Area	Practical starting range
Basking surface	About 90-95°F (32-35°C)
Warm side	About 80-85°F (27-29°C)
Cool side	About 70-75°F (21-24°C)
Relative humidity	About 30-50%; well ventilated and not persistently damp

Use digital probe thermometers at warm and cool ends, an infrared thermometer for basking surfaces, and a hygrometer at snake level. Guides vary slightly; have an experienced reptile veterinarian check your readings and setup.

Control every heat source with a thermostat. Guard hot elements; do not use hot rocks or unregulated heaters. Provide a day/night light cycle; low-output UVB may be offered with correct distance and shade. Never leave bright lights on at night.

Do not raise humidity by sealing ventilation. Damp conditions can contribute to skin problems. Offer a small humid hide for shedding instead.

6. Diet and Feeding Schedule

In captivity, offer whole, frozen-thawed rodents of appropriate size. Use prey no wider than the snake’s widest body area; growth, weight and condition matter more than a rigid chart. A reptile veterinarian can tailor the plan.

• Hatchlings and juveniles commonly eat about every 5-7 days.

• Adults commonly eat about every 7-14 days depending on prey size and body condition. Avoid overfeeding; hognoses can gain excess weight.

• Thaw prey sealed in a refrigerator and warm it before offering. Do not microwave, leave prey out for extended periods, or feed live prey when frozen-thawed is accepted.

• Use tongs or another safe feeding method; remove uneaten prey promptly. Record date, prey type, size and response.

Do not force-feed or use improvised scenting tricks without veterinary guidance. Persistent refusal, weight loss or illness signs need a reptile vet.

7. Feeding Refusals and Body Condition

A short refusal can follow a move, handling, shed cycle, seasonal change or incorrect temperatures. Check readings, privacy, hides, enclosure security and the snake's recent weight before changing food.

• Give a new snake quiet time after arrival and preserve its known prey type and routine initially.

• Offer food at the usual interval, not repeatedly every day. Remove uneaten prey after a reasonable supervised period.

• Do not switch to live prey as a routine shortcut; live rodents can injure the snake.

• Track weight weekly during a concerning refusal and less often in a stable adult. Seek vet advice for juveniles or any snake losing weight.

Avoid force-feeding, feeding a sick or cold snake, and handling immediately after a meal. A clinician should investigate ongoing refusal.

8. Water, Bathing and Shedding

Provide a clean, shallow, stable water bowl at all times. Refresh daily and clean whenever soiled. The bowl should allow drinking and voluntary soaking without risk of tipping or submersion.

Healthy western hognose snakes do not need routine baths. Voluntary soaking can happen, but repeated or forced soaking is not a cure for dehydration, mites, poor shedding or illness.

• For a vet-advised soak, use shallow lukewarm water in a secure container and supervise constantly; the snake must keep its head above water.

• Do not add soap, oils, salts or supplements. Do not pull off retained skin or eye caps.

• Before shed, the snake may look dull, hide more or refuse food. Offer a clean humid hide and maintain normal ventilation.

If the snake soaks persistently, inspect heat and humidity and contact a reptile veterinarian if behavior continues.

9. Handling, Temperament and Venom Safety

Give a newly acquired snake at least 1-2 weeks to settle and establish feeding unless the vet advises otherwise. Handle only when necessary at first, using slow movements and supporting the body. Avoid grabbing from above.

• If the snake hisses, flattens its neck, bluff-strikes or plays dead, stop and allow it to recover. Do not repeatedly provoke defensive displays.

• Wash hands before and after handling; avoid handling after touching prey. Do not handle while sick, in shed, or soon after feeding.

• Western hognoses are rear-fanged and mildly venomous. Bites can cause local swelling and individual reactions vary. Use calm, low-stress handling and do not rely on “harmless” claims.

If bitten, separate safely without pulling against the bite, wash the wound, and contact a medical professional or Poison Control for individualized advice. Seek urgent care for severe or worsening swelling, pain, breathing symptoms or systemic reaction. Never cut, suck, ice tightly or apply a tourniquet.

10. Household, Children and Other Animals

Keep one snake per enclosure. Cohabitation can cause stress, competition, bites and accidental breeding. Introductions should occur only as planned by experienced breeders, not for companionship.

Dogs, cats, birds, and other reptiles are not companions. Keep the locked enclosure in a room other pets cannot disturb; never allow direct contact.

• Children should not handle the snake without an adult directly supervising. Do not leave the child alone with the animal.

• Keep reptile supplies and prey away from kitchens. Wash hands after contact because reptiles can carry Salmonella.

• People at higher risk of severe Salmonella illness should limit direct contact and ask a clinician about precautions.

11. Cleaning and Daily Care

Daily: check temperatures and humidity, thermostat function, lock, water, animal posture and breathing; remove waste and soiled substrate.

Weekly or as needed: wash the water bowl, inspect hides, burrow structure, substrate and enclosure seams. Replace moldy or contaminated material promptly.

At intervals based on substrate and condition: clean the enclosure and furnishings with reptile-safe products, rinse thoroughly and dry before returning the animal. Never mix chemicals or expose the snake to fumes.

Use separate feeding and cleaning tools during quarantine. Keep a written log of feeding, shed, weight, stool and equipment changes.

12. Veterinary Care and Warning Signs

Schedule an initial exam with a reptile-experienced veterinarian after acquisition and ask about fecal parasite testing. Many clinics recommend annual preventive exams; follow the clinician’s schedule for this individual. Routine vaccines are not generally used for snakes.

• Urgent signs: labored or open-mouth breathing, repeated wheezing, nasal discharge, prolapse, severe weakness, bleeding, suspected burn or abnormal coordination.

• Prompt exam: repeated regurgitation, ongoing food refusal with weight loss, retained eye caps, sores, mites, swelling, mouth redness or repeated incomplete sheds.

• Bring enclosure photos, exact equipment specifications, temperature/humidity logs, weight and feeding records, and a fresh stool sample if available.

• Do not medicate, deworm, force-feed or use home remedies without veterinary direction.

13. Costs and Long-Term Planning

Expense	Approximate U.S. range	Notes
Adult enclosure and furnishings	$150-$450+	Females or custom builds may need more space
Heat, thermostat and meters	$80-$200+	Thermostat and digital readings are essential
Substrate, hides, water bowl, decor	$40-$140	Replace soiled substrate and worn gear
Initial complete setup	$275-$750+	Before animal purchase
Prey and routine consumables	$15-$45/month	Depends on prey size and shipping
Routine reptile exam	$75-$250+	Tests and treatment extra
Emergency reserve	$500-$1,500+	Serious illness may exceed this

These are broad planning ranges as of November 2026; local prices vary. Get current clinic quotes and plan for emergency care, electricity, substrate and transport. Do not buy before the enclosure and vet plan are ready.

Plan for a decade-plus commitment, travel coverage, power outages and responsible rehoming if circumstances change. Never release a captive snake outdoors.

14. Checklist and Sources

Quick checklist

Daily	Check warm/cool temperatures, humidity, thermostat, lock, water and animal; spot-clean.
Feeding day	Offer appropriately sized frozen-thawed prey; record response; avoid handling afterward.
Weekly	Wash bowl; inspect hides, substrate and burrows; check secure fittings.
Monthly	Record weight/body condition; test thermostat probes; inspect lights, seals and cords.

Book named by the owner

Gibs Westfall, *Western Hognose Snake Care Guide* (ISBN 9798278030409; eBay listing identifies a 2025 paperback). This is an original educational guide and does not reproduce the book.

Reptile & Rescue, Western Hognose Care Guide - husbandry and rear-fanged bite considerations.

Royal Veterinary College, Hognose Snake Care Factsheet - species-specific humidity and feeding.

Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital, Western Hognose Care Sheet - temperature, humidity and prey sizing.

VCA Animal Hospitals, New Reptile Visit - initial and preventive veterinary care.

California Poison Control case series, Western hognose bites (2026) - medical effects can vary and may need professional care.

Guidance and laws vary. This guide does not replace veterinary care or individualized medical advice after a bite.