



**Melissa Kaplan's  
Herp Care Collection**

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# Reptile veterinarians and zoo reptile curators on feeding live rodent prey

"When dinner becomes the diner..."  
- *Reptile vet John Strathman DVM*

Compiled by Melissa Kaplan

*I am occasionally taken to task by some herpers about my recommendation to feed prekilled rodent prey to snakes and carnivorous/omnivorous lizards. Those doing so have clearly never seen the effects of what a rodent can do to a predator. Boas and pythons are apparently especially susceptible to being seriously injured by their prey.*

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## **Fredric L. Frye, DVM**

The following text and photos are from Frye's chapter on pathologic conditions in his *Reptiles: An Atlas of Diseases and Treatments* (TFH Publications, Neptune City, NJ, 1992, pp. 159, 168); published concurrently under the title *Biomedical and Surgical Aspects of Captive Reptile Husbandry*, Krieger Publishing Co, Melbourne FL, 1991).

"Mice, rats, hamsters, guinea pigs, and rabbits (although rabbits and hare are lagomorphs, this information applies to them) all have sharp incisors and are far more intelligent than snakes. Eventually, these animals become hungry and frantic. If given the opportunity to do so, they may attack their erstwhile predators. Guinea pigs and rabbits rarely bite voluntarily, but they can inflict severe wounds on snakes that fail to kill them quickly. I have often examined snakes (usually South American boa constrictors) that have been attacked by their intended prey. The resultant trauma and soft tissue losses have been massive. In some cases, the periosteum and even bone itself are gnawed away by the rodent. Some of the most devastating rodent bites have in snakes that had bitten and begun to constrict (or at least hold) their squirming prey, then lost control of the rodent. The prey then attacked the predator's head or body, eyes, rostrums (including the external nares), and tongues or parts of the lingual sheath.

"Because most snakes are not only sight-feeders, but also employ olfaction in their selection of prey, the loss of the tongue is especially serious. When the tongue sheath has been damaged, the affected tissues, unfortunately, tend to form dense and proliferative fibrous scar tissue, which often incarcerates the tongue within its sheath."

1. A boa constrictor that had suffered massive rat-bite trauma from being left untended with a hungry and aggressive rat in its cage.
2. A boa constrictor that suffered massive rat-bite trauma and loss of skin tissue.
3. A boa constrictor whose rostrum almost to the animal's eyes had been gnawed by a hungry rat.

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## **Sean McKeown, Curator**

From his chapter, General Husbandry and Management, in *Reptile Medicine and Surgery*, (D. Mader, ed., W.B. Saunders Company, 1996, p. 17-18).

"Feeding live adult or subadult rodent prey to snakes is not desirable for a variety of reasons. At no time should any live prey be left in the enclosure with a snake unsupervised. If the reptile is not interested in feeding, it often makes no attempt to kill the prey item. Once the rodent senses this, it may repeatedly bite the snake, causing serious trauma or even death."

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**Susan Barnard, Curator**

From her book, *Reptile Keeper's Handbook* (Krieger Publishing Co, Melbourne FL, (Chapter 4, Feeding and Nutritional Disorders, pp. 32, 44).

"A prey animal, such as a rodent, can become lethally aggressive when placed into a reptile's cage. Killing food animals before feeding them to reptiles will prevent potential injuries to the feeding animals (this procedure also applies to venomous snakes). Few reptiles will refuse to eat dead prey. Killing food animals is also advantageous because they can be stockpiled in a freezer and used when food is unavailable. Animals whose diets are only available "in season" may starve if a supply of food is not stored. Contrary to popular belief, freezing prey does not compromise their nutritional value.

"Begin to condition snakes early in life to eat dead food."