

## PAMPERED OR PERFECT PET?

# A warm feeling for cold-blooded boas

BY BETH HATCHER  
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A love of snakes slipped into William Rushin's heart when he was just a boy.

At 5 and 6 he scoured his native Maryland for the slinky reptiles, catching garters and black snakes without fear.

At 7 his parents bought him his first slithering pet, a red-tailed boa constrictor he named Sniper.

Now 42, Rushin's still a snake lover — though he doesn't have to catch them anymore. He owns about 120; they live in a second-story room of his Wake County home.

"They're all red-tailed boa constrictors," Rushin said before he gently guided a curled-up snake from one of the many rectangular cages lining the room's walls.

He likes the "laid back" snake known for its dark-colored "saddles" or dorsal blobs of color on a lighter background color which can range through white, golden, grey or brownish with — of course — a reddish brown tail.

But even though all his snakes are the same breed, Rushin's quick to point out that each of his pets has its own personality, which helps to inspire their names — that along with their date of birth — mark the cage of each individual snake.

There's Bianca and Tito and Omar and Olivia. Don't forget Rosy, who at 8 is the matriarch of the group. And 6-foot-long Jewel, a favorite of Rushin's, is one of its largest.

Rushin can see the nuances and character in every ball of reptile laying about the place, but he knows that in others his pets only inspire fear.

"A lot of it's taught — avoid strangers, avoid snakes," Rushin

said.

As advisor to the Reptile Club at Cary Academy, where he teaches high school chemistry, Rushin works to overcome that fear by taking part in events like the Raleigh Museum of Natural Sciences' Reptile and Amphibian Day, which he and the club's students recently set up a booth displaying snakes and hopefully quashing a few reptile fears.

But for Rushin aversion to the no-legged creatures was simply never an issue.

"He has always felt very comfortable with them," said Ann Rushin, Rushin's mother who now lives in Boone with Emmett "Kip" Rushin, Rushin's father.

She remembers her son, the middle of three boys, catching creatures all throughout his childhood and not just snakes. A pool of turtles once spent the winter in the family's basement. Lizards and snakes also showed up as guests, harvested from the family's two-acre lot or from surrounding creeks or ponds.

Though never a reptile fan herself, Ann Rushin worked hard not to squelch her son's passion.

"I was behind him as long as it wasn't loose in the house," she said.

And for Rushin snakes have remained a favorite animal. What inspires fear in others, fuels interest in him — the snake's 180-degree difference from the typical human form.

"They're more interesting to me than say a cat," Rushin said of the cold-blooded creatures.

However, Rushin does own a cat, one named Scottie who lives outdoors, and his household also contains a couple of lizards and other types of snakes, some of which are the pets of his three

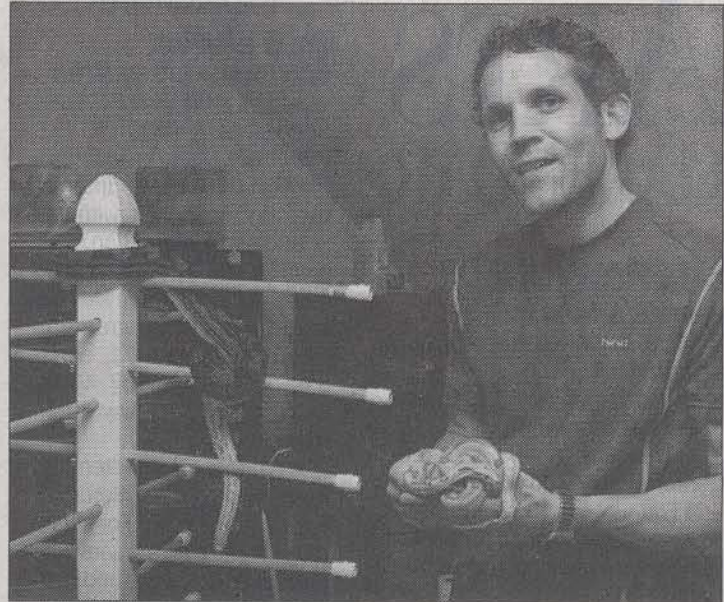


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William Rushin has loved snakes since he was a child. He now has about 120 boa constrictors.

### SAFETY

Boa constrictors aren't venomous, but use their muscular bodies to crush prey. Rushin said people should understand what they're getting into before getting a snake.

"My advice to a new owner, especially a young one, is to get a male as they can grow more slowly and attain much smaller adult sizes," he says. "A male will still be just 3 feet after two years. Purchased as a baby, it will quickly become acclimated to humans when it is still a 16-20 inches small animal."

children — Matthew, 13; Aaron, 11; and Sydney, 10.

The single dad encourages his children's love of the reptiles the way his parents encouraged him.

After all for Rushin it's a love that has turned into a business. Back in 2000 he started breeding snakes for sale, and right now has about 45 red-tailed boas up for purchase. He's already shipped snakes to places like Taiwan, Italy and England.

But that's only 45 for sale out of the 120 he owns. Some of them, like his founding female snakes, simply will never have a price. The business takes a sideline to his love of the animals. Who could part with a member of the family?

"They're definitely pets for me," Rushin said.

### DID YOU KNOW

■ A full grown red-tailed boa constrictor will reach 8-10 feet long and weigh up to 50 pounds.

■ They can live up to 30 years.

■ They have live births. Rushin said his snakes usually have 15-25 babies at a time.

■ Boas can sell for as little as \$60 up to thousands of dollars for those that are rare and possess special genetic traits. The coloration and pattern of the animal also have a great influence on its price and value.

■ Red-tailed boas occupy the lower elevations of South and Central America from Argentina all the way up into parts of Mexico. They also have established populations on some islands in the Caribbean, Rushin said.

■ Rushin said he feeds his snakes once every two weeks with frozen rats shipped in from Texas.

■ Rushin's collection contains several snakes with unique appearances, including those with atypical saddle markings, and those with an unusual salmon coloring.

Sources: Rushin and [www.about.com](http://www.about.com)

**Want to learn more** about William Rushin's red tail boas? Check out his Web site at [www.allboas.com](http://www.allboas.com).

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