

Male Ball Python Breeding Weight?

By Jay A. Martin

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Age or Weight? Or both?

There are many who believe that weight alone determines when a male BP is ready for breeding. I believe the factors that determine probable breeding are determined by a combination of both weight and age. Let me explain with a few premises. First, I do not want to use the terms "breeding age" or "breeding weight" because I do not believe one alone is the determining factor. Therefore, I will simply use the term "breeding" to include both weight and age. Second, I believe there are two major components in determining sexual maturity: physical and emotional maturity. Physical maturity is the ability of the male to produce viable sperm. This is believed to occur at a weight of around 500 grams. If the sperm is not viable, copulation is fruitless. Equally important is emotional maturity. This guides the male's innate reproductive drive to actually breed the female. This goes beyond the desire, into action. It's likely you have heard the following at least once: "*My male won't breed*".

Human males reach probable sexual maturity at around 12-15 years of age. However, most are not emotionally mature at that age and as a result are not engaged in sexual activity. As they become older, they become more emotionally mature (grow up if you will) and begin to engage in sexual activity. It is a general progression of stages: holding hands, kissing, touching and so on. So, a human male that has reached probable sexual maturity at the age of 14 may not actually engage in sexual activity until the age of around 17 or 18 or older. This is a simple analogy of a highly complex system. But it should give you an idea of what might be going on with your young Ball Python. Although, I don't believe Ball Pythons are quite as complex as humans. I believe there is less social influence and more natural influence.

Survival of the Fittest

Females will typically choose the strongest most dominant male to breed. Nature has instilled in her the need to pass on the strongest genes to her offspring to ensure their survival. As a result, smaller males lose out to larger, more mature males. Does this curtail the sexual drive of smaller males?

Younger animals are preoccupied with survival: finding their next meal and avoiding becoming a meal. A younger animal has more predators to worry about than an older, larger animal. Certainly, this plays a role in breeding success. For example, a large male Ball Python might be active day or night, while a smaller male may venture out only under the safety of darkness. This limiting factor reduces the smaller, younger male's exposure to possible breeding encounters.

Passive and Aggressive

While some young males are aggressive breeders, I believe the vast majority are passive breeders. What do I mean by passive? Well, an aggressive male is ready to breed as a moment's notice and attempts to breed fairly quickly when placed with a female. A passive male wants to get to know the female a little better. Maybe a few dates, meet her parents, and maybe then work out a breeding schedule. Don't laugh too hard. I have several males like this. This isn't always constrained by age. Many older, large Ball Pythons are passive breeders, just as some younger, small Ball Pythons are aggressive breeders.

Sometimes you can entice a passive breeder into being more aggressive though, through competition. That is, placing two males together – as long as they are about the same size.

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Otherwise, you just might push the smaller male deeper into passive breeding. By the same token, you can use two males to breed one female. If you have two pastels and you don't care which successful breeds your female, this approach can drastically increase your chance for breeding success.

Checking for Sperm Plugs

The procedure for checking for sperm plugs is similar to that for "popping". The gentle rolling of the thumb is designed to push the sperm plugs out of the male's hemipenes (see the illustration below). It's the small yellowish part just under the "m". Although, I'm not aware of any studies, most believe that if a male is producing sperm, it is viable (fertile).



When should you try Breeding?

Whenever you like. It really can't hurt to try. The worst that can happen is your male fails to breed the female. You will never know if your male is ready to breed until you put him with a female. If he isn't ready to breed, you'll know soon enough – you'll see him camped out in a corner far away from the female. If he is ready, he should be sliding all over her body in an attempt to position himself for breeding and coerce the female into copulation.

About the only time unsuccessful breeding is an issue is with breeders who purchase a young male (at a lower cost than an older male) and count on that younger male to breed the upcoming season and he doesn't. This pushes their plans back and as a result, the breeder may feel that he or she is losing money – due to annually falling prices. If I'm buying a male, I try to find one that is

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at least a year old and over a certain weight for my needs. To me, it makes good sense to pay extra for a male that is infinitely more likely to accomplish successful breeding than save a little on a male that "might be ready".

Conclusion

In my opinion, males are at probable breeding at about 650 grams and 1½ years of age. It should take at least that long to get a male up to that weight. This is not "set in stone", however. There will be those that are ready earlier and those who are ready later. And remember, just because he can does not mean he will and just because he will does not mean success. Keep these things in mind and hopefully you will enjoy more breeding success.

Jay A. Martin is a graduate of the University of Maryland and has spent the more than 30 years chasing reptiles of many types throughout the United States. He owns and operates Jay Martin Reptiles (www.JayMartinReptiles.com) where he continues to learn more about reptiles each and everyday. Jay would appreciate hearing your opinion about this article. You can send your opinion to jam-reptiles@cfl.rr.com.