

# COMPANION ANIMALS



## CRITTERS & EXOTICS



Many people appreciate the mystic and beauty of exotic animals such as reptiles, amphibians, birds or mammals of non-native species or individuals of native species that have been raised in captivity. They succumb to the temptation of purchasing critters, reptiles, amphibians and other exotic animals, often on impulse. Too often little thought is put into the care and commitment necessary to properly provide for these animals. Parents frequently purchase the animals as learning aids or entertainment for their children who are far too young to be responsible for an intelligent, emotional, living being.

Most critters, reptiles, amphibians and exotic animals are mass produced by the pet trade...just like puppies from puppy mills. They are viewed by the pet trade businesses as money making objects. Profit is placed above their welfare. They are

denied veterinary care, exercise and socialization. Many are captured from the wild and transported long distances. They are packed into crates and trucked or flown hundreds of miles to brokers and pet stores...often suffering or dying in the process.

Life in captivity for these animals often leads to neglect, pain, emotional distress and death. Many suffer from malnutrition, unnatural and uncomfortable environments and extreme stress from confinement. While they may look cute and cuddly, wild animals are wild and have very special husbandry requirements. The stress of captivity, improper diets, and unnatural breeding practices to pump out "products" takes its toll on these fragile animals. Trauma and injuries are common, and they are tossed aside when their novelty fades.

Pet shops treat animals as if they are no different than pet supplies or bags of animal food. They have no standards for whom they peddle the animals to. Internet businesses ship live animals to anyone with a credit card.

Although some of us may treat our companion animals well, many are treated poorly and neglected. Most spend only a short time in a home before they are dumped at a pound, given away or released into the wild. Selling these animals denies homes to millions of homeless and unwanted animals who await adoption in animal shelters.

If you have the time, resources and compassion to make a home for a critter, reptile, amphibian or exotic animal, adopt rather than supporting the inhumane pet trade industry. Like dogs and cats, millions of mice, rats, guinea pigs, hamsters, gerbils, reptiles, exotic animals and "pocket" pets are available through humane societies, shelters and rescue groups each year.

## EXOTIC ANIMAL PET FACTS

### BIRDS IN CAGES

Birds' instinctive yearning to fly is thwarted when they are confined to a cage. Even in a large aviary, it is virtually impossible to provide birds in captivity with a natural existence, since naturally changing temperatures, food, vegetation, and landscape cannot be recreated indoors, nor, of course, can the birds fly freely. As a result of the horrific traveling conditions they are forced to endure, many birds captured in the wild die long before arriving at their destination.

Thousands of birds are still taken away from their families and flocks every year, packed up as if they were plastic dolls, and sold at bird shows or through pet shops. Many don't survive the journey, and those who do are likely to be destined for a life of misery.

For people who have aviaries or who have the space for pairs or groups of birds to fly indoors, adoption from sanctuaries, rather than buying birds from shops or breeders, is recommended by animal campaigners.





## FISH IN TANKS

Fragile tropical fish, born to dwell in the majestic seas and forage among brilliantly colored coral reefs, suffer miserably when forced to spend their lives enclosed in glass aquariums. Robbed of their natural habitat, denied the space to roam, they must swim and reswim the same empty cubic inches.

The popularity of keeping tropical fish has created a virtually unregulated industry based on catching and breeding as many fish as possible, with little regard for the fish themselves.

In the Philippines, the source of most saltwater fish sold in the U.S., many fish divers collect their prey by squirting cyanide or other poisons into the coral reefs where fish live. Meant to stun them so that they will drift out of the reef for easy collection, the cyanide kills as many as half of the fish on the spot. Many others die from cyanide residue after being purchased. The poison also kills the live coral where the fish live, which can take thousands of years to grow back.

Most of the freshwater fish sold in the U.S. are easier to breed than their saltwater cousins and are bred on "fish farms." These breeding centers, seeking new market niches, create fish breeds that would never occur in nature. Treating fish as ornaments instead of as live animals, some fish breeders "paint" fish by injecting fluorescent dye into their bodies to make them more attractive to buyers.

Fish are wonderful creatures with individual personalities and attributes that most people know little about. They communicate with each other, form bonds, and grieve when their companions die. Fish communicate with one another through a range of low-frequency sounds from buzzes and clicks to yelps and sobs. The sounds, audible to humans only with special instruments, communicate emotional states such as courtship, alarm, or submission. Sadly, the pumps and filters necessary in many home aquariums can interfere with this communication. Most fish enjoy companionship and develop special relationships with each other. One South African publication documented the relationship between Blackie, a goldfish with a deformity that made it nearly impossible for him to swim, and Big Red, the larger fish who shared his tank. Big Red daily put Blackie on his back to swim him around, and when they were fed, Big Red swam Blackie to the surface, where they ate together.

## SNAKES

Snakes are elongated, limbless and flexible reptiles. They are found on every continent of the world except Antarctica. There are over 3,000 different known species of snake. Around 375 species are venomous. Python reticulatus are the largest species, reaching over 28 feet in length.

Snakes are carnivores (meat eaters). They feed on a variety of prey including rodents, termites, birds, frogs, reptiles and even small deer. They cannot chew, so they must swallow prey whole. Their flexible jaws allow them to eat prey bigger than their heads, and their unique anatomy allows them to digest large prey. Some species of snake use venom to hunt and kill their prey. Some kill their prey by tightly wrapping around it and suffocating it, a process called constriction.

Snakes do not have eyelids. They have only internal ears. They smell with their tongues. Some water snakes can breathe partially through their skin, allowing them to spend long periods underwater. Snakes shed their skin several times a year in a process that usually lasts a few days.



Snakes are cold blooded and must regulate their body temperature externally by sunning themselves or retreating to cool areas. They hibernate during the winter. Most species lay eggs, but some give birth to live young. Some species care for their young.

Depending on the variety, snakes can live for decades and grow to lengths in excess of 28 feet. They require at least a 30-gallon tank, frequent checkups, and care by a veterinarian who specializes in reptiles. Fresh water and a spotless environment must be provided at all times. Most are carnivorous. They are susceptible to a variety of parasites as well as blister disease, respiratory and digestive disorders, and mouth rot. Strictly controlled daytime and nighttime temperatures and the careful application of pesticides are required in order to guard against mite infestations.

Purchasing a snake caught in his or her natural habitat encourages the removal of wildlife from delicate ecosystems. Buying captive-bred snakes only encourages breeders to replenish their stock. If you must have a snake as a companion animal, adopt from a local shelter or rescue group.

## IGUANAS

Iguanas are native to the jungles of the Caribbean and central and South America. Green iguanas are forest lizards who live high in the South American rainforest tree canopy. Young iguanas live lower in the canopies, while older adults reside higher up in the tree tops. Iguanas bask in the sun, with little need to visit the forest floor below other than when female iguanas lay their eggs.

The green and brown scales of iguanas allow them to blend extremely effectively into the surrounding forest. Iguanas will remain extremely still, going unnoticed, until predators pass by. They often chose basking spots on tree limbs hanging over water so they can dive into the water to escape predators. Iguanas are excellent swimmers and go beneath the water surface to avoid predators.

Iguanas have excellent sight able to detect movement from incredibly long distances to seek out prey and detect approaching predators. They use visual signals to communicate with each other through a series of rapid eye movements. They are considered omnivores, but most iguanas in the wild tend to eat an herbivorous diet. They feed on ripened fruit and leafy green plants.

These large, docile lizards are often a popular choice as exotic “pets”.

Green iguanas are some of the most frequently abandoned companion animals, likely because people find out too late what is required to care for them. A properly cared for iguana can live for more than 20 years and grow to be more than 6 feet long. The enclosure for a full-grown iguana should be at least 18 feet long, humidified, and maintained at a particular temperature with specific timetables for darkness and ultraviolet light. Common problems for captive iguanas are metabolic bone disease from calcium deficiency, mouth rot, respiratory disease, abscesses, and ulcers. Wild iguanas do not suffer from any of these illnesses. They're also strict vegans, limited to a very specific range of greens and fruits. Costs for food, an enclosure, lighting, and vet bills can total hundreds of dollars per year. It takes about a year of daily interaction to socialize an iguana, and even then, sexually mature males will be very aggressive six months out of the year if they see their own reflections or if confronted with other iguanas.

There is a health risk associated with keeping any reptile. Seventy thousand people in the U.S. contract salmonellosis from direct or indirect contact with reptiles and amphibians every year. Children, pregnant women, and people with compromised immune systems are particularly at risk of serious illness or death. If you or anyone close to you is in one of these categories, rethink bringing a reptile into your home—even healthy looking animals may be carry-



ing the disease. Many reptiles are brought into the country with little or no inspection or quarantine.

If you decide you have the time and resources to keep an iguana as a companion animal, adopt from a local shelter or rescue group.

## GECKOS

People who would never take on the commitment of a 6-foot iguana might be interested in geckos. Sadly, these are very popular reptiles in pet stores. These small, frail-looking lizards can often live up to 30 years

and require a very particular environment without the slightest variance in temperature. They feed on insects and baby mice.

## TURTLES

Turtles are reptiles with hard shells that protect them like a shield. The shell is made up of 60 different bones all connected together. Many turtle species are able to hide their heads inside their shells when attacked by predators. Their hard shells enable them to live without fast reflexes and elaborate predator avoidance strategies.

Turtles are highly intelligent and social animals. They enjoy playing. They have good eyesight, hearing and an excellent sense of smell. Their shells contain nerve endings, aiding in their sense of touch. Some aquatic turtles can absorb oxygen through their skin so they can remain submerged underwater for extended periods of time and even hibernate underwater.

The largest turtle is the leatherback sea turtle, which can weigh over 2000 lb. Several species of turtles can live to be over a hundred years of age, including the American Box Turtle.

Some turtles lay eggs in the sand and leave them to hatch on their own. The baby turtles make their way to the top of the sand and scramble to the water while trying to avoid predators. In some species of turtle the temperature determines if the egg will develop into a male or female. Higher temperatures lead to females; lower temperatures lead to males.

Most of the North American species of turtles available in pet stores have been taken from their natural habitats. Most other species are captive bred—most likely in Louisiana, which has dozens of turtle “factory farms”. Most states have laws either banning or restricting the sale of turtles.

Just like any other reptile, a turtle's needs are very specific: thermostatically controlled temperatures, enough water to swim in, a large housing area, and a varied diet. The average lifespan of an aquatic turtle is 25 years, while a land tortoise could outlive you. Welcoming a reptile into your home means a commitment of time, space, and money. Don't support turtle mills. Always adopt from a shelter or rescue organization.





## EXOTIC PETS

Exotic animals - lions, tigers, wolves, bears, reptiles, non-human primates - belong in their natural habitat and not in the hands of private individuals as "pets." By their very nature, these animals are wild and potentially dangerous and, as such, do not adjust well to a captive environment.

Exotic animals do not make good companions. They require special care, housing, diet, and maintenance that the average person cannot provide. When in the hands of private individuals the animals suffer due to poor care. They also pose safety and health risks to their possessors and any person coming into contact with them.

Individuals possessing exotic animals often attempt to change the nature of the animal rather than the nature of the care provided. Such tactics include confinement in small barren enclosures, chaining, beating "into submission," or even painful mutilations, such as declawing and tooth removal.

If and when the individual realizes he can no longer care for an exotic pet, he usually turns to zoos and other institutions such as sanctuaries to relieve him of the responsibility. However, all the zoos and accredited institutions could not possibly accommodate the number of unwanted exotic animals. Consequently, the majority of these animals are euthanized, abandoned, or doomed to live in deplorable conditions.

For the animals' sake and for your health and safety, do not buy exotic animals as "pets." Support legislation at all levels to prohibit private possession of exotic animals. Find out how your state, city and county regulates private possession of exotic animals. If your state, city or county does not prohibit private possession, contact your state senator and representative or your city and county council members and urge them to introduce legislation banning possession of exotic animals.

## FERRETS

The domestic ferret is believed to be native to Europe, a subspecies of the polecat. They were domesticated about 2,500 years ago to help farmers hunt rabbits by crawling into rabbit burrows and scaring the rabbits out of their holes. In the wild, ferrets feed mainly on mice, small rabbits and small birds.

Most ferrets sleep 18 hours a day, about six hours at a time in between playing and eating for about an hour. They are often most active at dusk and dawn.

Pet stores typically purchase extremely young ferrets, who are as charming as all baby animals, in order to increase their sales. To meet this demand, ferret breeders often prematurely spay, neuter, and de-scent ferrets, which can result in medical problems and even premature death. During shipping, many ferrets die or become ill. In such cases, pet stores merely ask for replacements.

The novelty of having a ferret, often purchased on impulse, can quickly wear off. When ferrets become too difficult to handle, they are often abandoned outside or entrusted to overcrowded animal shelters.

If you are willing to open your home to a ferret, adopt from a shelter or rescue group rather than supporting the inhumane pet industry. Ask your local Wildlife Department, Fish and Game Department, humane society, or veterinarian about the legality of keeping a ferret where you live and whether you will need to obtain a permit if you adopt one.

If you have young children, be sure to monitor their interaction with the ferret as closely as you would with a dog. If more than one ferret will be living in your home, expect "dominance fighting" to take place in the beginning. Fortunately, ferrets can usually coexist peacefully, and even amicably, with cats and dogs. Of course, supervision is a must, for safety reasons. Ferrets aren't typically compatible with birds, fish, rabbits, reptiles or rodents.





## RABBITS

Rabbits are small mammals found naturally in several parts of the world. Rabbit habitats include woods, meadows, grasslands, deserts and wetlands. These intelligent, social animals live in groups, and the best known species, the European rabbit, lives in underground burrows, or rabbit holes. Rabbits are crepuscular, most active at dawn and dusk.

Rabbits are herbivores who feed on grass, nuts and berries, vegetables and fruit. They dig burrows to hide and store food. Their large ears allow them to easily detect predators. They can see nearly 360 degrees, with a small blind spot at the bridge of the nose. They survive predation by burrowing, hopping away in a zig-zag motion, and, if captured, delivering powerful kicks with their hind legs. Their strong teeth allow them to bite in order to escape.

Rabbits are fast breeders with the average gestation period just over a month and the mother giving birth to an average of 6 babies. Rabbits give birth and raise their babies in burrows.

Rabbits have no place in the “pet” industry. These complex animals are often purchased on a whim, especially in the spring, and potential caretakers rarely understand the specific needs of their new companion. Once the novelty has worn off, many bunnies are

neglected, relegated to outdoor cages, dumped at shelters, or simply turned loose in the wild, where they have little chance of surviving. Hundreds of organizations and shelters are trying to deal with this growing problem.

Dealers and “pet” stores usually request 4-week-old bunnies because they require less space and are “cuter,” but bunnies of this age are ill-prepared to be weaned from their parents. Many people who purchase these young, small bunnies do not realize that the average weight for an adult rabbit is anywhere from 2 to 20 pounds. Federal regulations apply only to those breeders or “bunny mills” that do at least \$500 of business with a particular pet store, and enforcement is lax, so the rabbits that you see in the store may not have been properly transported or cared for.

Rabbits are social creatures with gentle natures and individual personalities, and they need just as much attention as a dog or cat. They are not suitable companions for young children. Rabbits require specific foods, stimulating environments, and veterinarians who have specialized knowledge of their species.

If—after careful consideration—you have decided to welcome a rabbit into your home, adopt from your local humane society or rabbit rescue group. Rabbits can live up to 10 years and require annual checkups by a veterinarian. Bunnies need lots of company and can become withdrawn and depressed if not provided with plenty of love and companionship. Rabbits do get along with dogs and cats if they are all safely socialized.

## GUINEA PIGS

Guinea pigs, or cavies, are found naturally in the Andes mountains in South America. They were domesticated in South America around 5,000 BC and used as a source of food. The domestic guinea pig is a subspecies of the Andes guinea pig and therefore cannot be found in the wild.

Guinea pigs are small, furry herbivores that can live 7 years or more. They communicate with high pitched squeals. Wild guinea pigs eat grass and small plant matter. They also supplement their diet by eating their feces, soft pellets that offer vital nutrients.

Guinea pigs are very social animals and prefer to be among other guinea pigs. They are also territorial and may not like having their cage cleaned. They often will urinate and drag themselves along the cage floor after cleaning to remark their territory.

Perhaps because of the perilous misconception that guinea pigs make great “starter pets” for children, these fragile animals have become popular “pocket pets.” Despite their popularity, guinea pigs aren’t worth as much as a bag of dog food to the stores that peddle them. Sick guinea pigs rarely receive treatment, many are shipped to pet stores too young to be weaned and many arrive with mites.

If you’re willing to open your home to one or, preferably, two guinea pigs, adopt from a shelter or rescue group. Before you do, be prepared to care for your guinea pig for as long as seven years or more and to spend at least \$20 per week for supplies. An exotic-animal veterinarian will need to see the guinea pig annually and can also help with regular nail trimming—a must. If you are housing a male and female together, you must also first have them sterilized. However, spay/neuter surgeries are more dangerous to perform on small animals, so it is preferable to house females with other females and males with no more than one other male—three or more males together will fight.



## MICE & RATS

Rats are found naturally throughout the world. They originated in Asia and migrated around the globe as accidental passengers on human voyages. They are one of the most widely spread and adaptable animals on the planet. They are generally much larger than mice. Rats usually live in small, dark places. They are scavenger animals and omnivores, feeding on plant and animal matter.

Mice are small rodents found naturally in nearly every part of the world, including parts of Antarctica. There are around 40 different species of mouse, ranging in color and size dependent on their environment.

Mice and rats are often thought of as pests because they can damage crops and spread diseases through their parasites and feces. But, they are an important part of the ecosystem, including as a source of food for small mammals, reptiles and birds. Rats and mice can carry and spread diseases, though they rarely spread diseases to humans. When they do, it is usually caused by infected fleas living on the rats.

Mice and rats, just like dogs, are supplied to pet stores by mass breeders, who aggravate the problem of these species' overpopulation and the resulting abandonment and abuse. Shipped to distributors in small, cramped containers that are breeding grounds for parasites and viral and bacterial infections, they often reach the pet store ill, malnourished, and/or pregnant. Small animals represent a small profit for pet stores, and their deaths represent a minor loss. Their living conditions in pet stores generally reflect this.

Prospective guardians of mice and rats should keep in mind that they may require veterinary treatment and that this can be as expensive for them as it is for cats or dogs. Rats and mice are social but territorial animals. A lone, caged animal will languish, but two or more crowded together without adequate space may fight.

If you are determined to have a mice or rats, adopt – don't buy. Adoption is a far better choice than supporting a pet store. Like all other companion animals, rats and mice are often abandoned to local humane societies and animal shelters.

## GERBILS & HAMSTERS

Gerbils are naturally found in the sandy plains of the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Originally known as desert rats, they were commercially introduced to North America and bred as "pets". Gerbils have long tails that they are able to shed, allowing them to escape predators. Their tails also help them balance when standing on their hind legs. They have sharp claws they use for burrowing into desert sand to escape predators by quickly disappearing under the sand. Gerbils build extensive networks of tunnels and rarely surface other than to find food and water.

Over 100 different species of gerbils live in the wild. Most "pet" gerbils are Mongolian gerbils,



found in their natural habitat in the 1860s and first captive bred in the 1930s. Most gerbils are diurnal (active during the daytime), though pet gerbils are often more nocturnal.

Hamsters were found in Syria in 1839 and have been held captive as "pets" and test subjects since the 1940s. They are believed to have originated in the deserts of east Asia. They inhabit semi-desert regions around the globe where soft ground allows burrowing. In the wild, these nocturnal animals spend most of their evening digging and foraging for food. During the heat of the day they

live in underground burrows, consisting of numerous tunnels and chambers with separate eating and sleeping rooms. They are solitary animals. Some will fight to the death to defend their territory. Hamsters eat nuts, seeds, fruits, vegetables, berries and grass. They use their large cheek pouches to store food until they return to their underground burrows. Many hamster species are fast runners, capable of escaping most predators. They can easily retreat into their burrows because the size and shape of their hind feet allow them to run as quickly backwards as forwards. More than 20 different species of hamster live in the wild. The Russian dwarf hamster is the smallest. The common Syrian hamster is the largest.

Because of their size, gerbils and hamsters are mis-perceived as being "low maintenance" animal companions. They often bite and do not make good companion animals for children. Like all rodents, they can carry rabies and other diseases and, if released into the wild, pose a threat to established ecosystems. If, after carefully considering these factors, you are sure you want to bring these delicate creatures into your home, avoid pet shops and adopt from a shelter or rescue agency.

Their dietary needs include a variety of greens, fruits and seeds, some of which are available in packages formulated for hamsters or birds. Their teeth never stop growing, so it is imperative that these animals be provided with hard, digestible items to chew.

A large wire-mesh cage with a solid base works best. Colorful plastic cages may be enticing, but they are difficult to clean, and gerbils may chew their way out. You'll need a water bottle, nonwood based bedding such as straw or shredded white paper, chew toys and an exercise wheel. Wooden ladders and toilet paper rolls also make great toys. Only use solid exercise wheels for gerbils, since their long tails can become entangled in wire wheels.

Gerbils do not like to be alone and live in families of up to 20 members in their natural habitat. If kept in a solitary environment, a captive gerbil will become depressed. If you're planning to adopt gerbils, two males or two females from the same family will bond together.

Do not let hamsters and gerbils become too cold or they will go into hibernation.

