

An Exotic Explanation

by Shannon Denniston

Abby Fritchie ferrets out a unique friend.

AH, THE BLISS of sitting down with a good book, faithful feline in your lap or loyal lab at your feet. That's a scene that likely appeals to a majority of the population, but for others, owning something that appeals to the masses isn't for them; they are part of the world of exotic pet lovers.

In fact, a study by National Geographic estimates more than 15,000 tropical or subtropical (exotic) animals are kept as pets in the United States. But in Frisco, the most popular pets right now are not tropical at all, they are ferrets and rabbits; in the bird category it would be the African Grey Parrot. Among reptiles, there is the ever-popular bearded dragon or ball python, and the list goes on.

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO OWN AN EXOTIC PET?

Can you really snuggle up with a hairy tarantula? Maybe you are thinking of an adorable ferret, a bearded dragon or even a cuddly snake. Some would go so far as to call owning an alligator or ball python "thrilling!" Just imagine for a second, holding a colorful corn snake or a slithering milk snake, just letting it swirl around your arms and into the seat cush-

ion of the sofa, only to catch it across the living room behind the television moments later.

So, maybe the question really is, who would want to own an exotic pet? According to Nathan Johnson, who is looking into buying a Ball Python, sometimes it's an attraction to the unusual. "I am a personal fan of throwing people off - doing the unexpected. I like to surprise." But beyond that, he says, there are also practical considerations. "Taking care of a snake is much easier in the day-to-day than a cat or dog. I don't have to worry about care if I go on a trip or vacation."

Other people with exotic pets never had any interest in owning one at all; they are simply parents who caved in to the wishes of their children and those big pleading eyes. According to Dr. George Martin of Plantation Pet Health Center in Frisco, there is no single kind of person who owns an exotic animal as a pet. "When you think about it, it could be as simple as someone just wanting a pet that does not require a lot of attention," he says, echoing the comments of Mr. Johnson. He goes on to explain that some snakes only have to be fed once a

week. After thinking it through, more people might warm up to the idea of a cold-blooded pet.

Dr. Martin also explains that the word "exotic" tends to confuse people because often, if an animal is not a dog, cat or maybe even a rabbit, it's considered "exotic." And exotic pets can come in many shapes and sizes. Animals ranging from reptiles to guinea pigs to chameleons are popular pets now. And if you are not willing to brave a raccoon, don't fret, you can easily choose something like a lizard or a turtle.

Sometimes ownership comes from curiosity. Many people wonder what it's like to get so close to a hairy tarantula enclosed in a terrarium or beautiful bird locked up in a cage or a large scaly snake sleeping safely behind the glass of its container. But before you go on a "test drive" with an Egyptian Uromastyx (spiny-tailed lizard) or something equally unusual, be sure to consider all the pros and cons of owning an exotic animal.

Most exotic animals are extremely delicate creatures. And while they can be fun to observe as a curiosity, there are certainly considerations to keep in mind when owning one. First, the animal's



Some people find spiders a hair-raising pet.

health and behavior depend solely on the environment in which they are raised. It is important to take note that they often require special diets and unique lighting to maintain good health. The only way to know what it will take to properly care for the animal of choice is to do some in depth research before buying. As Nathan Johnson says, "Not knowing completely how to care for an animal that has very specific habitat needs will cost it its life

and cost you time and money."

It's also essential to have reasonable expectations about the purpose you want these pets to serve. Exotic pets are not going to be cuddly, so don't expect them to be. Experts say these animals will not love you the same way a dog or a cat seem to, sometimes they don't even recognize their owners. In other words, while they may recognize you as the one who feeds them, they still may not see you as their

caregiver.

There is also the possibility of danger to keep in mind. If you play with the animal too much, intruding on its space, it can quickly turn vicious and snap at the handler. Professionals advise that children always be monitored when handling exotic pets, as they tend to be the most vulnerable to bite wounds and scratches. Despite Disney's loving depiction of rodents, they do not possess the same feelings as other more common animals. On the plus side though, there are no potty breaks, house training, frequent feedings or walking necessary to maintain the health of an exotic animal.

Then the question becomes where to find such a pet. While some animals can be found on the street, and you might even be able to trap a creature directly from the wild, experts recommend that you not interact with exotic animals in this way. Some may carry what is called zoonotic diseases like salmonella or rabies, which can be harmful to humans. If possible, it's best to acquire these animals safely and securely from a pet store.

If, after thoroughly researching these exciting pets and honestly considering whether or not you can provide the proper care you decide ownership is for you, go for it! You might enjoy the fun and excitement of owning one of these unusual pets more than having a loyal lab at your feet.

Shannon Denniston is an animal lover who prefers the large four legged and yes, furry, variety.



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