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West Nile Virus Advice

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Special Species Clinic Opens At VHUP

If you go to a pet store and fall madly in love with an iguana, know that iguanas require UV lighting and temperatures up to 110°. Avoid the clerk's encouragement to buy your pet a mate—iguanas prefer solitude. That 10-gallon aquarium is only good for about a year, after which the critter outgrows it, if not your entire apartment.

Unfortunately, most people who acquire exotic pets are clueless, and therein hangs this tale.



Mueller Chameleon

In January VHUP opened the Special Species Medicine Clinic. “‘Exotics’ sounds too exotic,” says Karen Rosenthal, DVM, MS, ABVP-Avian, Director of Special Species Medicine, which treats all house pets beyond dogs and cats: ferrets (the third-most popular pets in the country), rabbits, reptiles and birds, for starters.

“Everyone knows that if you spay or neuter a dog or cat, the animal will be calmer,” says Rosenthal. But if you impulse-buy an iguana, you might not realize that, as the male becomes sexually active at about age one, it may bite the hand that feeds it.

While most veterinarians can handle the medical and surgical needs of cats and dogs, they may be less conversant with the nutritional needs of, say, a Solomon Island boa. But Evelyn Ivey, DVM, and Rosenthal each spent two years in residencies in special species, followed by continuing ed—either teaching or learning.

Special species are heir to afflictions that dogs and cats don't get, says Rosenthal, who recently met a hedgehog with a severe neurological disease. “Normally, when you pet a hedgehog, it curls into a ball. But this guy couldn't do that any more. It could not walk or blink its eyes.” She ordered a CAT scan of the

hedgehog's brain. Results were inconclusive, but, then, there's no textbook with 30 photos of hedgehog CAT scans. Perhaps no one has ever scanned a hedgehog.

Even the husbandry of special species is different. “With dogs and cats, all you have to know is whether to let them out of the house. The grocery-store aisle of packaged foods is fine for healthy pets. But with exotics, that's rarely the case. We don't even know the nutritional requirements of many birds we treat. Most commercial rabbit pellets are not healthy foods.” The lesson, she says, is that people with special pets need special vets.

The clincher is the ancillary help—clinical lab technicians who know how to read the blood work—plus the cadre of orthopedic surgeons, radiologists, and so forth, that most veterinary practices don't have access to.

The special species clinic features cages with adjustable heaters on its own ward, with its own specialist nurse, Mary Taylor. Regular hours are Monday and Wednesday during the day, appointments need to be made. Emergency service is available only for pets that have



Toucan

already been seen in the special species clinic.

People get as attached to these animals as they do to Fifi and Fido, says Rosenthal, but exotics often require a financial investment. So owners may be even more eager for a cure, or at least a diagnosis. One of her first VHUP patients in the new clinic was a hyacinth macaw with a wound on its back. She determined that the bird was healthy and would heal on its own. She wished the bird adieu. Its owner can return at any time.  S.P.

West Nile Virus Advice

Dr. Jon Palmer, Veterinary Infectious Disease Specialist at New Bolton Center, asks members of the equine community to be aware of the simple precautionary steps that can be taken this spring to reduce exposure to the mosquito-borne West Nile Virus:

Prevent or limit the animals' exposure to mosquitoes. Horses should be stabled inside from dusk to dawn, and insect repellents should be used.

West Nile Virus causes encephalitis, or inflammation of the brain. It is transmitted by mosquitoes from birds, not by animal-to-animal, or animal-to-person contact. The incubation period is one to two weeks, and signs in horses include a mild flu-like syndrome (depression, listlessness and sometimes fever) or more serious neurologic signs such as weakness, incoordination (stumbling), circling, hyperexcitability, convulsions,

paralysis, coma, or even death.

There is no vaccine to prevent West Nile Virus. Although there is no specific medication or treatment for the disease, the signs can be treated by your veterinarian to help the horse through the problem. Horses are considered “terminal hosts” which means that they are not a source of infection for other horses or people. It is highly unlikely that a mosquito feeding on an infected horse could ingest enough of the virus to transmit it to other animals. Thus, it is not necessary to quarantine an infected horse or a farm where infection has occurred and unlike Equine Infectious Anemia (EIA, Swamp Fever), it is not necessary to euthanize infected horses. In outbreaks which have occurred in the Mediterranean basin about half of the horses with serious disease have recovered and have posed no risk to other horses. 