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Special Species Clinic: Feathers, Scales, and Fur

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Special Species Clinic
Page 4



Commencement 12



Alumni Weekend 20

INSIDE

- A Message from the Dean 2
- Environmentally Friendly Manure 6
- Mouse Eggs from Embryonic Stem Cells 7
- Rosettes & Ribbons 8
- Teaching Awards 10
- V.M.D. Notes 14
- Animal Crackers 27
- Special Gifts 28
- Saratoga Comes to Philadelphia! 31

Feathers, Scales, and Fur

by Susan I. Finkelstein

On a recent morning at the Ryan Veterinary Hospital, a curious sound could be heard above the meowing and barking that have become the wards' constant chorus. There was no mistaking it: a goose was honking. The noise caused no special alarm to the Ryan staff, though; "Goose-Goose" was simply another patient.

After being mauled by a decidedly quarrelsome dog, Goose-Goose was in need of fixing. The domestic brown goose was brought to Ryan Emergency Service by his anxious owner, where his broken bill was set in place by an external metal device and will remain so until healing is complete. Because he must be fed pulverized grain through a feeding tube until his beak fully mends, Goose-Goose has become somewhat of a fixture at Ryan's Special Species Medicine Clinic—waddling behind students, flapping his wings, and adding a distinct (albeit dissonant) voice to the animal cacophony that is the Ryan Hospital soundtrack.

Unusual pets like Goose-Goose can inspire the same levels of affection and devotion in their owners as do the more conventional feline and canine companions that inhabit most of our homes. (In fact, Goose-Goose's owner expressed his gratitude to Ryan in the form of a \$15,000 donation to the hospital, which will be used to purchase new rigid endoscopes for use in birds and other special species.) "They love their snake, turtle, or ferret just as much as another person loves a cat," observes **Dr. Karen Rosenthal**, director of the Special Species Clinic, which was established in 2000. "They care deeply and will pull out all the stops to have their pets made well again." One distressed guinea-pig owner recently paid several



Russian hamster

thousand dollars for the diagnosis and treatment of his cardiac-challenged pet.

Dr. Rosenthal and staff veterinarian **Matthew Johnston, VMD**, see all of the approximately 900 rabbits, rodents, birds, ferrets, reptiles, big cats, and sundry other exotic

animals treated at the Clinic each year—a striking display of endurance by any measure. **Dr. Avery Bennett**, an internationally recognized exotic animal surgeon, presides over surgery cases. Of course, the assistance of fourth-year students on two-week rotations and of nurse practitioner Mary Taylor, who runs the ward and performs routine and repeat tests, complete the team that makes such a large and diverse case-load possible. In addition to daily referrals from the Emergency Service, the Clinic provides wellness examinations, specialized diagnostics, and care for non-traditional pets. Diagnostic tests include advanced imaging studies such as ultrasonographic and echocardiologic examinations and computed tomography. Among the specialized surgeries offered at the Clinic are pet bird neutering and radical treatment of rabbit abscesses with antibiotic-impregnated beads.

One of the more peculiar types of companion animals cared for at the Clinic is the sugar glider, a nocturnal, five-ounce Australian marsupial that launches its tiny body between treetops much like a flying squirrel. Sugar gliders, which can live fifteen years if cared for properly, are colony animals that are happiest in multiglider households. They also tend to form a strong bond to one person, especially if acquired while still young; selling a glider after having it for several years is considered very cruel and almost inhumane. Gliders, attention cravers by nature, have even been known to die from loneliness when neglected by their owners.

The once-uncommon ferret, cousin to weasels, skunks, and otters, now makes its residence in millions of homes in the United States—and Clinic staff see many "businesses" of these domesticated pet-shop favorites ("business" is the collective name of a ferret group). "Ferrets are great pets, especially for



Baby conure

teenagers," says Rosenthal. "They are funny, easy to keep, and very gentle, as they have been bred for a long time and breeders have selected for a companion temperament." Like sugar gliders, ferrets that do not receive enough attention and interactive play with their owners, or are caged all day, can become depressed.

When it comes to physical illnesses, pets such as birds, rodents, and rabbits often do not exhibit symptoms until they are gravely ill, making treatment difficult, if not impossible. Because these small animals are prey species, visible signs of weakness make them vulnerable to attack in the wild. Removing animals from their natural habitats does not necessarily alter instinctive behaviors.

The Humane Society of the United States estimates that some 50 million birds are kept as pets in the United States, placing them behind cats and just ahead of dogs in terms of popularity. Unlike cats and dogs, however, some of the larger pet birds can live up to 100 years, during which time they require specialized diets, chaperoned time outside of their cages, and lots of attention and intellectual stimulation. "Birds are not dogs with feathers," says Rosenthal. Emotionally neglected pet birds can develop psychological problems that include aggression toward others or compulsive self-



Painted turtles

mutilation. Feather picking, a common problem in stressed birds, occurs when the bird substitutes chewing for preening, sometimes causing significant loss of feathers. "Feather picking has physical, psychological, behavioral, and husbandry aspects," says Johnston. "We work with Dr. Ilana Reisner, director of the Ryan behavior clinic, and her group to help the birds." The exotic animal doctors and behaviorists teach owners how to handle and properly interact with their birds.

Reptiles, too, are enjoying a boom as com-

panion animals: an estimated 3 percent of American households own 7.4 million reptiles. “People buy exotic pets, particularly reptiles, in pet stores,” says Rosenthal, “and are not told how to keep these animals, how to feed them, or how to handle them. They are kept under improper light and not given the right food. Remember, many reptiles, particularly iguanas and some species of snakes, live in trees, in a humid environment.” A common misconception about the feeding of snakes—which have a 20- to 30-year lifespan under optimal conditions—is that they must eat live animals. Not so, says Rosenthal. “It can be dangerous, as the rodent might attack the snake in self-defense and inflict wounds. It’s much better to feed killed rodents, which can be purchased.”

People possessing exotic pets often try to alter the nature of the animal rather than the nature of the care they provide. Confinement in small barren enclosures, chaining, beating “into submission,” or even painful mutilations such as declawing and tooth removal are tragic ways that some owners try to make their non-traditional companion animals more “user friendly.” Clearly, much can go awry for the many exotic pets that share our homes.

Exotic animals aren’t the only ones who can suffer adverse effects in the households and communities where they have been transformed into pets. Across the country, incidents have been reported in which some of the larger exotic pets, such as big cats, have attacked humans and other animals, sometimes after escaping from their enclosures, oftentimes while still in the home. Even animals commonly believed appropriate for children—such as hamsters, gerbils, or mice—“can be nasty and they bite,” says Dr. Johnston. “A rat would be a better pet. Rats are docile, intelligent, and fastidiously clean. They use a litter pan and come in lots of colors. They have great personalities and live two to three years.”

Giant Gambian rats, however, are not as desirable as their domesticated kin. In

June, after an outbreak of monkeypox in three Midwestern states, federal health officials indefinitely banned the import, sale, and shipment of Gambian rats in the United States; prairie dogs and other members of rodent species indigenous to Africa also were part of the ban. Monkeypox, a smallpox-related virus, is believed to have originated in Gambian rats and subsequently transmitted to prairie dogs at an Illinois pet store where both species were being housed together. At least 57 people who then handled the infected prairie dogs fell ill. (Monkeypox joins several animal-related diseases from other parts of the world that have appeared in the United States in recent years. AIDS is believed to have crossed to humans from African chimpanzees. West Nile virus—previously confined to Africa, western Asia, and the Middle East—is spread by mosquitoes and birds. Sudden acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS, which has killed at least 812 people worldwide since it first surfaced in November in southern China, likely had its origins in Chinese wildlife markets.)

This is not the first time the government has restricted certain pets due to public-health concerns. African pygmy hedgehogs enjoyed a brief heyday as pets in Pennsylvania households—and made their share of appearances in the Special Species Clinic—before the Pennsylvania Game Commission barred all ownership last year due to the possibility that they can carry foot-and-mouth disease. In 1975, federal officials banned the sale of very young pet water turtles when it became known they were the source of 14 percent of all human salmonellosis cases in the country. The same year, officials banned imported monkeys and



Prehensile tail porcupine

other nonhuman primates as pets because they can carry serious diseases like tuberculosis.

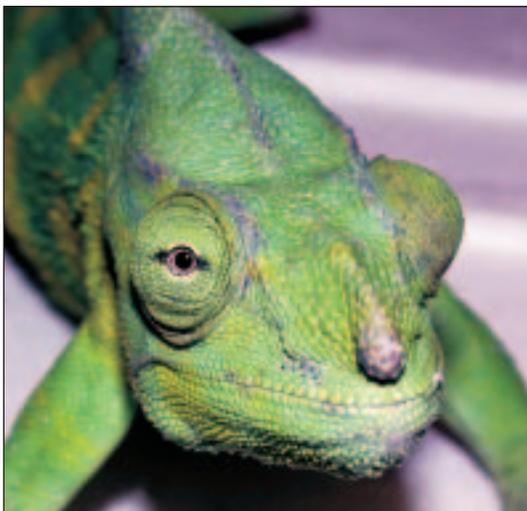
Reptiles, including all types of snakes and lizards, also pose particular safety risks. Nearly 90 percent of all reptiles carry salmonella, and humans can be infected by touching a contaminated surface or from contact with an animal’s feces. In addition, many snakes, the most common pet reptile, can cause serious injury through a bite or constriction.

Despite all the inherent risks and difficulties involved in owning an exotic pet, the growing interest in these animals has led to an increase in the amount of information pertinent to their veterinary care, nutrition, and proper housing requirements. Exotic-pet owners today have access to an unprecedented amount of knowledge through clubs and societies, specialty magazines, Internet sites, and scientific publications. Realizing the importance of informed owners in the health and longevity of their nontraditional companion animals, the Special Species Clinic incorporates education about responsible pet ownership with state-of-the-art diagnostics and treatment.

Appointments for special species can be made by calling the Ryan Veterinary Hospital at (215) 898-4680. In addition, the Emergency Service is available 24 hours a day for these animals, and emergency clinicians always have access to a member of the Special Species Medicine Clinic for consultation. The Emergency Service can be reached at (215) 898-4685.

Please check with state agencies to determine which animals are legal as pets.

Dr. Johnston has recently left for the Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine.



Mellers chameleon