

FEATHERS, FINS OR FUR

By Amy Young



If you're hesitant to take the plunge with a cat or dog, it may be worth considering something more exotic. Feathered, finned, furry, and even scaly friends can provide meaningful interactions and valuable lessons.

How to Choose an Exotic Pet for Your Child

Kids are persistent, especially when it comes to asking for a pet. A study of 2,000 parents of school-aged children reported that 74% of kids have asked for a pet. But they don't just ask once. On average, they bring up the question 11 times per month (and double down around the holidays) beginning at age six. By the time they are 18, parents could hear this request more than 1,500 times.

Food for Thought

Exotics may seem easier than dogs or cats, but they still require time, money and attention. It is essential to understand the requirements of various species. Although none of these animals need daily walks, and most won't chew up the upholstery, there are still less-than-glamorous routine tasks involved, such as cage cleaning and water changes.

"You are going to ask the same questions you would for bringing any new pet into the home," says Dr. Michelle Hawkins, chief of the UC Davis veterinary hospital's Companion Exotic Animal Medicine and Surgery Service. "Can I provide the right environment for this animal's welfare? Is my child going to be responsible to care for this pet, or am I? With the knowledge that we have now, the food we feed them and the environments we put them in have all changed dramatically in the last 20 years. The lifespans have doubled, so parents can't rely on the experiences they had as children."

Next Steps for Finding Your Pet

Once you've narrowed down your selection, consider the options for finding your new pet. Although there are many online sources, this is not an advisable route. Animal shipping is often not humane and you want to meet your new family member before taking them home. Also be aware of any state laws governing ownership of certain species. For example, it is illegal to own ferrets, sugar gliders, and hedgehogs in California.

Some of the most popular species can be found at pet stores. Many of the big chain stores have veterinarians in their leadership and do a good job of choosing breeders that provide healthy animals.

Local shelters are another potential source for some small mammals. Remember that these prey species are particularly prone to high stress levels, and shelters can be high stress environments. Be sure to ask questions about the animal's health and behavior before making a decision.

Rescue or foster organizations are also great sources, as are reputable breeders. These groups have specialized expertise in particular species, and can offer information and support. In Northern California, these groups include the House Rabbit Society, Mickaboo Companion Bird Rescue, the Northern California Herpetological Society, and many others.

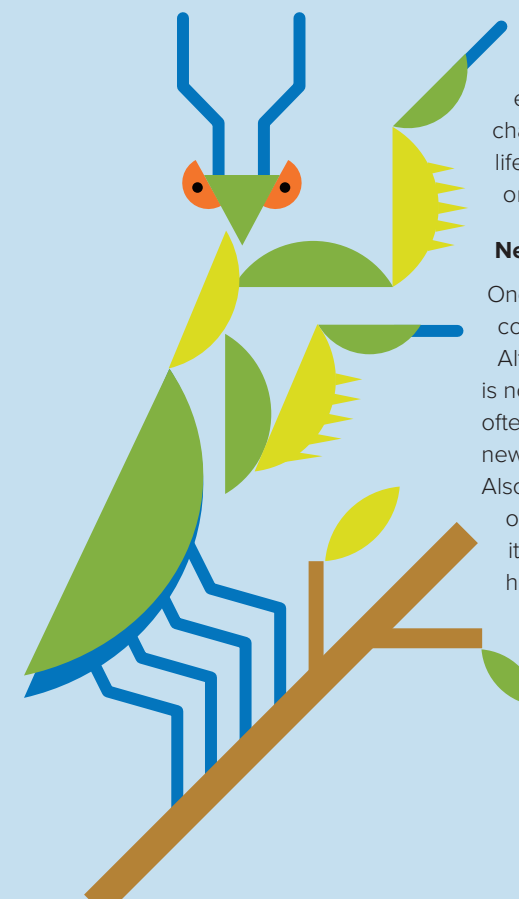
Lastly, it is important to consider your options should you be incapable of caring for the pet at some point.

"Please never, ever release an animal into the wild that has been your pet, no matter what animal," says Hawkins. "If you feel that you cannot keep an animal, call one of the rescue organizations."

Pets released into the wild can displace native wildlife and cause other damage to the environment. They are also not accustomed to finding food, water, and shelter or escaping predation, and may not survive on their own for long.

Researching your new pet's needs will reduce the stress for everyone involved and contribute to a positive pet-owning experience for the whole family.

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Here are some important things to discuss as a family before settling on a new exotic companion:

HOUSING AND ENVIRONMENT

Indoors or outdoors? Enclosure size? Will that change as the animal grows? Lighting, temperature, and humidity requirements?

SIZE

Some animals start small and stay small. Others can grow quickly. Research expected adult size for the species you are considering.

LONGEVITY

A long-lived species may still be around when your child leaves the nest. Will they take the pet with them? Will you be able to care for it?

DIET

If the idea of regularly purchasing insects or mice to feed to your pet makes you squeamish, it might be wise to choose one whose diet is more plant based. Many species also require specific nutritional requirements.

HEALTH CONCERNS

What kind of veterinary care will this pet require and how much will it cost? Will they need to be spayed or neutered? Is this species prone to certain types of cancers, dental disease, or nutritional deficiencies?

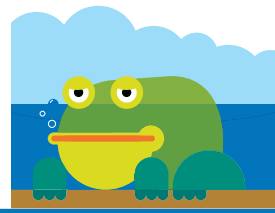
BEHAVIOR

Will this pet be happy by itself or does it need a buddy? Is this species active during the day, or only at night? Many a child loses sleep thanks to their hamster's late night wheel workouts. What is their anticipated activity/energy level and general temperament? Do they tolerate regular handling or do they bite and scratch?

ZOONOTIC DISEASES

Reptiles, chickens, hedgehogs and, to a lesser extent, amphibians potentially carry *Salmonella*, a bacterium that can cause illness in humans. Strict hygiene and handling rules for these animals are necessary to avoid possible sickness. For this reason, veterinarians do not recommend reptiles, in particular, as pets for children under five years of age.

The school provides resources on care and nutritional management for a number of exotic pet species through the Animal Health Topics website. The Companion Exotic Animal Medicine and Surgery Service at the veterinary hospital provides wellness care, specialized diagnostic testing, medical treatments, surgical options and emergency care for exotic companion animals. To schedule an appointment, call (530) 752-1393.



Amphibians

Amphibians live part of their lives in water and part on land. They can be fun to watch, but aren't very sociable or good for handling. Setting up and maintaining the proper environment is the most challenging part of keeping one. You will need to pay close attention to water quality and ensure appropriate temperature and humidity levels. Given proper care, many species can be long lived; some frogs can live into their twenties.

A GOOD CHOICE:

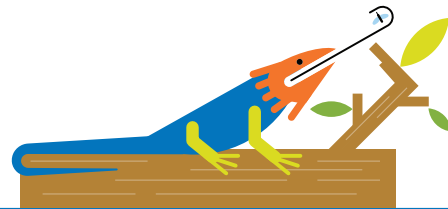
South American horned frogs/Pacman frogs

OTHER OPTIONS:

tiger salamanders, tree frogs, axolotls

NOT RECOMMENDED FOR CHILDREN/BEGINNERS:

fire-bellied toads



Reptiles

Quiet, sociable and interactive, reptiles are often good first pets. But, some require mice, rabbits, or bugs to eat. Just because many of these species are small does not mean that they have short lifespans, nor that they are easy to keep. Bearded dragons and leopard geckos can live up to ten years; some tortoises have lifespans of 100 years or more. Some require specific temperature and humidity gradients in order to thrive, which can be expensive. Aquatic reptiles can exhibit health problems without enough vitamin A in their diets, and calcium deficiency can be a concern in omnivorous reptiles.

A GOOD CHOICE:

bearded dragons

OTHER OPTIONS:

leopard geckos, corn snakes, water turtles

NOT RECOMMENDED FOR CHILDREN/BEGINNERS:

constrictors, pythons, large tortoises



Birds

Colorful, interesting to watch, and interactive, birds can also be a challenge. Some can be trained to talk or whistle. They can also be noisy, messy, sensitive, and bite. Birds require a diet with fresh vegetables high in calcium to ensure proper calcium intake. Life spans range from 5–10 years for smaller birds, to 60 or more years for larger species!

A GOOD CHOICE:

parakeets (budgerigar, a.k.a. budgies)

OTHER OPTIONS:

finches, canaries, cockatiels, conures

NOT RECOMMENDED FOR CHILDREN/BEGINNERS:

lorikeets, African grey parrots, Amazon parrots, macaws



Invertebrates

Generally easy to care for and comparatively short lived – insects, arachnids, and arthropods can be fascinating and rewarding pets. Certain species, like Madagascar hissing cockroaches, are best viewed through their enclosure. Others, like some tarantulas, are docile and easy to handle. (In fact, they are popular as classroom pets.)

A GOOD CHOICE:

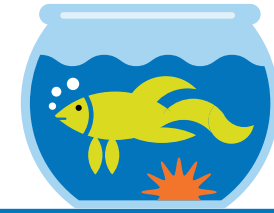
ants

OTHER OPTIONS:

Mexican red-knee and Chilean rose tarantulas, Madagascar hissing cockroaches, stick bugs, mantids

NOT RECOMMENDED FOR CHILDREN/BEGINNERS:

scorpions



Fish and Aquatic Pets

Many interesting and colorful species are inexpensive and relatively low maintenance. (Note that saltwater aquariums require more maintenance and are better for experienced owners than freshwater setups.) Some fish are generally short lived, whereas koi can live 40 years. Similar to amphibians, particular attention must be paid to water quality and temperature.

A GOOD CHOICE:

betta fish (a.k.a. Siamese fighting fish)

OTHER OPTIONS:

hermit crabs, goldfish, tetras, danios, guppies, mollies

NOT RECOMMENDED FOR CHILDREN/BEGINNERS:

koi, saltwater species



Small Mammals

Small mammals are often the ultimate landing site for first-time pet owners. They have the fur factor, and many species are sociable and active. Although they usually tolerate handling well, they may bite and can be hard to catch. Guinea pigs, chinchillas, and rabbits need an appropriate diet to keep their teeth healthy and worn at the correct length. Life spans vary, with small rodents typically living 2–3 years, guinea pigs living 8–9 years, and some rabbits living into their early teens.

A GOOD CHOICE:

rats

OTHER OPTIONS:

guinea pigs, mice, hamsters, rabbits

NOT RECOMMENDED FOR CHILDREN/BEGINNERS:

ferrets