

Creature Comforts

Care for the Homeless of All Shapes and Sizes

By Jill Howard Church



Photo: MHS



Photo: MHS

Above: "Sprout" is a six-month old cougar who was confiscated from a home in a Detroit suburb. Cougars are illegal to own in Michigan without a permit from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

Below: "Charlie," a two-year old ferret, was brought in when the owners decided that caring for a ferret was too expensive. Fortunately, he has found a permanent loving home.

What do arctic foxes roaming the streets of Florida have in common with iguanas loose in the trees of Minnesota? Both are examples of how exotic "pets" abandoned by irresponsible owners can end up fending for themselves until specialized shelters come to their rescue. Unfortunately, a combination of legal loopholes, exploitive businesses and consumer ignorance has created a near epidemic of homeless animals of many species, and there is no single cure to fix the problem.

It is a sad, but well-known fact, that millions of stray and unwanted cats and dogs are taken in by the country's animal control and humane society facilities, to be placed for adoption or ultimately euthanized. But not so well known is the growing problem of animals other than cats and dogs becoming homeless and in need of care: rabbits, ferrets, guinea pigs, reptiles, and even large carnivores. State laws regarding the sale and possession of certain species vary, and Americans are more frequently purchasing – and sometimes just as often discarding – all sorts of animals they often know little about. Because traditional animal shelters aren't always equipped to handle the special needs of different species, finding new homes for these animals presents a big challenge.

In Florida, where restrictions on exotic animals are rather lax, the Wildlife Care Center (WCC) in Ft. Lauderdale acts as both a rescue and

rehabilitation site for native wildlife, domestic animals, and those considered "domestic exotics." Because the center has specialized facilities and staff, it receives the animals that other humane societies can't accommodate. Diane Watchinski, the group's director of development, has seen a cornucopia of critters come through the door, each with his or her own story. There was Mango, a cockatoo so neglected and stressed that he plucked all of his feathers out and looked like "a bald chicken." Then there was Samantha, a pot-bellied pig who was found abandoned on the street and brought to the center; she was later adopted by a local resident who flew her to a new home in a private jet.

The two emaciated arctic foxes found running around Ft. Lauderdale were presumably kept as pets before either escaping or being turned loose by people who no longer wanted them. The WCC sent them to a sanctuary in Pennsylvania, but their predicament is increasingly common when animals ill-suited for captivity become too much for their owners.

"We have a big iguana problem here," says Watchinski, with "big" being the operative word. Pet stores that sell iguanas when they're six inches long sometimes don't fully explain that within two years the reptiles may grow up to six feet long. Adult iguanas – especially males – can be aggressive, and require large amounts of space and a proper diet.

Tropical birds such as parrots and macaws are colorful and plentiful, but can live up to 50 years and demand attention quite loudly. Watchinski is astounded by how many people pay thousands of dollars for an exotic bird, only to give it up because it won't stop screaming.

Prairie dogs are another popular novelty, and they arrive at the WCC regularly. "Every time we see some new 'fad' animal [being sold], we know we're going to get deluged with them," says Watchinski. "Everybody has these whims and impulses." Like

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parents who buy their children rabbits at Easter, then want to dispose of them when the kids lose interest by Labor Day. Or the teenager who buys a boa constrictor, then leaves it behind when he goes off to college. The WCC releases native wildlife whenever possible, and does its best to place the rest either in private homes or permanent sanctuaries. Of the approximately 11,000 animals taken in by the WCC in the past year, 200-300 were “domestic exotics.”

Although loose iguanas can survive for a while in sunny Florida, that is not the case in chilly Minnesota, where an organization called Animal Ark has a special program devoted to reptiles whose natural origins are far away. The group began taking in iguanas, snakes, and similar species three years ago when such animals started appearing in pet stores with greater frequency. The problem was so serious, that two years ago the group called on the Minnesota attorney general’s office to help compel a national pet store chain to better disclose to its customers what owning an iguana involves. As Executive Director Marlene Foote emphatically states, “They shouldn’t be imported, they shouldn’t be bred, and they shouldn’t be sold as pets.” She recalls how one iguana was found frozen to death in a tree; another was discovered abandoned in an apartment building inside a cage so small that “he had rubbed his nose off trying to get out.” Iguanas can live up to 20 years and often die of liver disease and metabolic bone disease from lack of proper food and sunlight. She places the blame for such tragedies largely on the retail companies that sell exotics. “These pet

companies need to be responsible,” Foote says. “All of these little exotic animals should not be sold as pets.”

Animal Ark has produced educational television shows for a local paid programming station, and has sent representatives to pet stores to try to educate the proprietors. The group currently has 15 iguanas in foster homes, and is trying to adopt them out in pairs. Foote says they seldom reproduce, and instead of surgical neutering, their eggs can be taken to prevent births. Animal Ark is a no-kill organization, but when it reaches its maximum capacity for reptiles, any others are usually turned over to the local herpetological society, which might euthanize six iguanas a week.

In nearby Michigan – again, not exactly swamp country – the Rochester Hills branch of the Michigan Humane Society (MHS) has had an influx of American alligators and spectacled caimans, which are being sold as pets in the Detroit area and elsewhere. Stores sell the reptiles when they’re six to eight inches long, but wildlife specialist Sue Neal says, “I usually get them when they’re two and a half to three feet.” She doesn’t know what prompts people to buy animals that will ultimately grow up to 15 feet long. “I don’t care if you handle the reptile every day, you’re not going to have a loving companion,” she says. “Even zoos are challenged to house these animals correctly.” Her shelter takes in many kinds of animals, including chinchillas, guinea pigs, rabbits, and more. She, too, must deal with the results of both large and small pet stores who sell any and all animals to the unsuspecting public.

Above: This blue and gold Macaw was received as a stray. He is currently residing with an MHS volunteer who is socializing him so that he may find a new home with someone who knows the special care that large birds require.

Below: Pygmy hedgehogs are nomadic and travel a mile every night in their natural habitat, but in captivity, they become obese and withdrawn like this one.

“They really give people an unrealistic expectation, and then the animals are the ones who will end up suffering as a result,” Neal laments. She has even gone “undercover” to pet stores to see what stores tell customers about certain exotics, and reports, “Time and time again you’ll be told, ‘Oh, it’s a wonderful pet.’”

Each species has its own needs. For example, chinchillas must have regular exercise and access to dust baths. Rabbits and other rodents must be given chew toys to keep their teeth whittled down.

The Rochester Hills facility takes in many different animals from all over the state, and has both a special building and special staff to care for the reptiles, livestock, and even big cats and primates who end up there. “You name it, we’ve probably had it,” Neal says. In fact, the facility ranks second in the United States for the number of cougars and other big cats it receives – about 30 in the past 10 years.



Photo: MHS



Photo: Wildlife Care Center



"Slim" was rescued from a slaughter sale and after spending some time at Middleburg Humane Foundation, was adopted by a loving family.



Photo: Courtesy of Middleburg Humane Foundation

Unlike the smaller, more domesticated animals, primates and exotic cats (such as the ringworm-infested lion cub found wandering in downtown Detroit) must be placed in proper sanctuaries. Some of Michigan Humane's animals have gone to the Shambala sanctuary in California run by actress and animal advocate Tippi Hedren, who also serves as president of the American Sanctuary Association, a national group that helps coordinate the rescue and placement of animals in need. Fortunately, the Michigan legislature recently passed two bills that will restrict or ban the possession of wolf hybrids and large carnivores such as bears and big cats as of January 1, 2001.

MHS is fortunate to have a staff veterinarian with experience to treat exotics. "Whether the animals are neutered before release depends on the placement and the animal," Neal explains. Those who take the animals permanently must agree not to breed, sell, or use them for entertainment. "To find a suitable, permanent home becomes a full-time job," Neal says. But based on the increased frequency of atypical pets

needing hard-to-find new homes, "Something has to give soon."

Balancing the number of animals coming in as rescues and going out

as adoptees is a tricky and expensive business, but one that the Marin Humane Society in California does well. Notes Brigitte Coleman, the group's animal placement and care manager, "We take anything and we're equipped to handle everything." In addition to housing more than 80 dogs and up to 100 cats, Marin Humane includes among its four-building compound, a barn with stalls for "farm" animals and a "small companions" room for birds, reptiles, and rodents--whom Coleman quickly notes are positioned so as "not to stare at each other." All rabbits are both neutered and given ID microchips, and all male rats are neutered (spaying females is difficult). The society places about 10-15 parakeets, finches, and other birds per month, and adopts out a good number of rats, rabbits, box turtles, and others. "The reptiles are usually strays," says Coleman. "The birds are usually turned in by the owners." Once evaluated for health and temperament, new residents are taken to the public adoption part of the facility and made available for new homes. Volunteers help match potential adopters with appropriate animals. All adopters must sign a no-breeding contract for

the animals because, Coleman logically explains, "If the animals are in a shelter they're surplus, and there's no need to make more." Home inspections are required for some species, including reptiles.

The goats, cows and other large domestic animals come from area residents who buy "mini ranches" and then either move away or otherwise become unable to care for the animals. Ducks and chickens who are sometimes turned loose in local ponds also end up at Marin Humane, as do soft-shell turtles.

"Probably the weirdest thing we ever had was a Gila monster found walking down someone's sidewalk," Coleman recalls. Children who had coincidentally just visited a zoo spotted the animal and recognized what it was, much to some adults' disbelief.

Marin Humane has an extensive education and public awareness program, including a Family Animal Care Academy class that helps advise and instruct people before they make unwise animal acquisitions. This is especially useful for parents, Coleman says. "Ninety percent of the time they want something inappropriate for the age of the child." She suggests, for example, that families adopt rats instead of rabbits if they want a pet a child can actually play with.

Some shelters and rescue groups specialize only in certain types of animals. Organizations such as The House Rabbit Society in California and the Home for Unwanted and Abandoned Guinea Pigs in Georgia offer shelter and/or foster care in addition to referral services. The Pennsylvania Ferret Rescue Association (PFRA) is a statewide, no-kill organization whose three branches accept ferrets from SPCAs, owner surrender and other

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sources. Kimberlie Barone, who runs the group's Montgomery County facility out of her home, takes in five to 10 ferrets a month. "Ferrets tend to be an impulse pet," she explains, and when their needs prove too much or their novelty wears off, owners give them up. Volunteers provide care and help raise funds for food, bedding, and veterinary care, which can be considerable for an animal that has a 75 percent chance of developing two forms of incurable but treatable cancer by the age of 4 (out of an average lifespan of five to seven years). The group has created a tell-it-like-it-is handbook for potential adopters, who pay \$75 for single ferrets or \$125 for a pair. PFRA also goes to ferret shows, SPCAs, and other places as part of its educational outreach. Its placement rate is high, with most ferrets finding new homes within about five months. Early neutering is essential, since sexually mature males emit a strong odor and females who go into heat stay in heat until they either breed or are given estrogen shots.

Barone says that ferrets who come from pet stores are much more likely to be turned over to PFRA than those who come from individual breeders, since breeders charge more money and screen adopters' suitability, while pet shops "really just want to sell the animals" and do so at cheaper prices.

Large animals, too, have specialized groups looking out for them. In Middleburg, Virginia, equines in this affluent "horse country" regularly wind up as victims of abuse and neglect. The Middleburg Humane Foundation maintains a five-acre shelter that includes paddocks and fields to accommodate horses as well as pigs, goats and sheep. Most of the horses are from life-threatening cruelty cases; because they are legally considered livestock, they are exempt from companion animals laws that mandate adequate care.

Hilleary Bogley, the group's president and founder, says that the group adopts out two to five horses a

month. But adoptions come only after the horses are rehabilitated, which can take as few as six weeks for younger animals and as many as six months for older ones. "We're very particular about our adoptions," she says. "Horse adoptions are completely different from a cat or dog adoption. A lot of first-time owners don't know what's involved." People who purchase ponies for their children or think horses can live by eating grass alone, can neglect the animals to the point of causing severe hoof and teeth problems.

Bogley also finds needy horses when visiting the monthly Marshall, Virginia, horse sale, where animals are bought and sold both for meat and for private ownership. The issue of surplus animals applies to large animals as well as smaller ones, she says. "There's an overpopulation of horses as there is in cats and dogs."

The group's quarterly newsletter and tours for schoolchildren are aimed at raising public awareness, and Bogley strongly believes in reaching young audiences. "The bottom line is to respect your fellow earthlings," she asserts.

Nearly all shelters and rescue groups are privately operated and funded, although some are affiliated with municipal animal control agencies or state wildlife departments. Caring for such numerous and diverse animals can strain both budgets and staff, and the increasing need for such care is pushing many groups to their limit. Using local media to illustrate the plight of individual animals helps get public attention, but as Neal admits, "Most people aren't aware that humane societies deal with this issue...and it's the wave of the future." The reasons for the problem are many, and as she observes, "It needs everybody working together to solve it."

About the Author: Jill Howard Church is a writer and editor based in Atlanta, Georgia. She has worked for state and national animal rights organizations since 1987.

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