

An Exotic Menagerie

Some local animal lovers just aren't satisfied with anything less than extraordinary pets.

Dogs and cats are nice, most of the time, but for some people only an exotic pet will do.

You used to hear about them all the time, an unusual animal someone was keeping as a pet. However, in the last 10 years it has become illegal to keep or sell some of the once popular animals, such as monkeys, ocelots and the larger cats. But there are still plenty of strange animals in the homes of Eugene residents.

Area pet store managers say they stick mostly to stocking and selling typical domestic animals though some stores offer slight variations from the norm. Brenda Henry of Little Ocean pet store says large snakes, lizards and exotic fish are some of the more unusual pets sold. The store also stocks caimans, or pet crocodiles, which Henry says will "eat anything" and often grow to be four feet long. Boa constrictors, pythons, king snakes, chameleons, ghecks and iguanas are popular purchases from among the reptile family.

Melissa Ives bought her Colombian boa constrictor, David, and her conehead lizard, Conie, from Little Ocean. Ives and David recently celebrated their one-year anniversary together — David got a rat. "I had to wait to get him until I moved out of my house," Ives said.

It seems her mother detests the idea of snakes.

On a diet of four rats every one to two weeks, David has grown to five feet two inches in four years, and Ives estimates he should reach eight to 10 feet in length. Ives' friends have mixed reactions to her pet, and she gets asked many questions. When people are around, it helps for David to be holding his own pet, a plastic frog named Jasper. "He doesn't look as threatening when he's holding it with his tail," Ives says.

With a male boa in the room, one could almost forget about Conie, who is only a foot and a half long and blends into his environment by standing stock still. "He doesn't have a cage...he's very independent. When he wants to eat he gets on top of his box of crickets, and I feed him," Ives says.

But she suspects Conie might be a bit "mentally slow."

"To get him to drink I have to put him in his water dish so he

can feel the water on his feet."

She also described Conie's bad case of what she calls "aquarium complex."

"We can't keep him in an aquarium because all he does is scratch at the glass for hours. Even in this big apartment he will go to the window and scratch on the glass. He thinks he's in a big aquarium."

Ives' roommate, Laura Bartholomew, also has a fetish for the big snakes although hers is a red-tailed boa named Sheba. "They say boas are the labrador retrievers of the snake world. They tolerate a lot," Bartholomew says.

It's a busy household in which the two snake-lovers live. In addition to the two boas and the lizard, Bartholomew also has two smaller lizards, two parakeets, a cockatiel and a couple fish tanks complete with a newt or two. And it's all done legally in the confines of their apartment laws. "We can't have any animals that carry fleas, but our manager seems to like them (the snakes)," Bartholomew says.

University freshman Melissa Schwartz also has an unusual pet that seems to have the run of her house. Her ferret, Nikolai, is seven months old and is not confined to a cage regularly. She swears he's totally potty trained.

"You've heard of stupid pet tricks," Schwartz says. "Watch this." Tempted by a drop of sticky vitamin/mineral supplement, Nikolai first sniffs then props himself up impressively on his hind feet. A satisfying lip smacking is evidence his reward was well worth the effort.

High-quality cat food is Nikolai's main staple, but he eats things like grapes and potato chips to supplement his diet. "He's a fiend for chocolate," Schwartz says. He's also a fiend for her roommates' socks. "He's a kleptomaniac," she says.

Veterinarian Thomas Danelski specializes in the treatment of exotic animals and says most problems with unusual pets are nutrition-based. "Most have inadequate diets or calcium deficiencies. A lot of times they come in with pathological fractures from falling off a table or something, and their bones aren't strong enough," he says.

Danelski is glad to see the dropoff of exotic animals as



Laura Bartholomew holds her red-tail boa constrictor, Sheba, after allowing her to run loose in her apartment. Bartholomew says she has to be careful the boa doesn't get under the refrigerator.

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