

Animals: Dinner with pets can be an alive and kicking meal

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Why a scorpion, a python?

"I like having animals that people say are impossible to tame," McFadden said.

"Everything deserves a chance; a lot of these animals get a bad rep for no reason except that people are afraid."

Luckily, McFadden, a former University student, has no fear of these usually frightening animals.

"There is a difference between having respect for an animal for knowing it can hurt you and being completely terrified of it," said McFadden, who also speaks at schools to diminish stereotypes of these exotic animals.

So where would someone keep a scorpion?

"You get a 5-gallon aquarium with a screen on top," McFadden said. Occasionally McFadden will let her scorpion, Billie Holiday, out.

"I don't usually let her just walk around," McFadden said. "She's only 8 inches long, so it's real easy for her to get lost. I basically just let her walk on me. You can't really pet her. She'll sting you."

And what about the stinger? Does that pose a problem in handling Billie?

"Some people clip 'em off," McFadden said. "I don't because that makes it hard for them to eat."

Billie, by the way, eats baby mice. Live ones. Using her stinger to kill her dinner, Billie also likes to chow down on crickets and mealworms.

Serving live prey for dinner is nothing new for McFadden. Zeus, her Burmese python, eats one live rabbit every two weeks.

Although she was hesitant to feed Zeus live animals at first, she has since gotten used to it.

"I guess I just consider it to be a part of the food chain," McFadden said. "Although my friends tease me because I'm a vegetarian."

Yet with the wild kingdom in her living room, McFadden surprisingly hasn't had a case of one pet trying to eat another.

"I don't usually let them out of their cages at the same time," McFadden said. "When I lived with my mom, her cat used to play with Zeus' tail. No big deal. Animals like these will only eat one another if they haven't been fed in a long time."

For busy college students, McFadden,

who works at Little Ocean pet store, recommends either a small snake, spider, or scorpion as a pet.

"Maintenance-wise, these pets don't take a lot of time," she said. "But they're not very intelligent, so if you don't handle them for a long time, they tend to forget who you are. If you stick your hand in their cage, they won't know what you're doing and may attack you."

"Scorpions are particularly great for people who don't have a lot of time," McFadden said. "We just sold a lot to University dorm students."

She also recommends knowing more about your potential pet than just thinking they would be cool to have.

"Most people buy these type of pets when they're babies because they're cute, but they don't realize how big they can grow," McFadden said.

Big is an understatement, as Burmese pythons, for example, can grow to be 20 feet long and 300 pounds. Zeus is currently 12 feet long and 60 pounds.

Like her python, McFadden's iguanas, Yngwie and Mahalia, are a long-term commitment, as each has an average life-span of 15 years. And, she added, both don't stop growing until the day they die.

So what is the attraction for such a large, long-term pet? The answer could be in convenience.

"Reptiles are fast becoming the most popular pets for high-maintenance people," said Brian Henson, a Lane Community College zoology student and herpetologist. "You feed them once a week, don't have to walk them ... they're pretty low-maintenance."

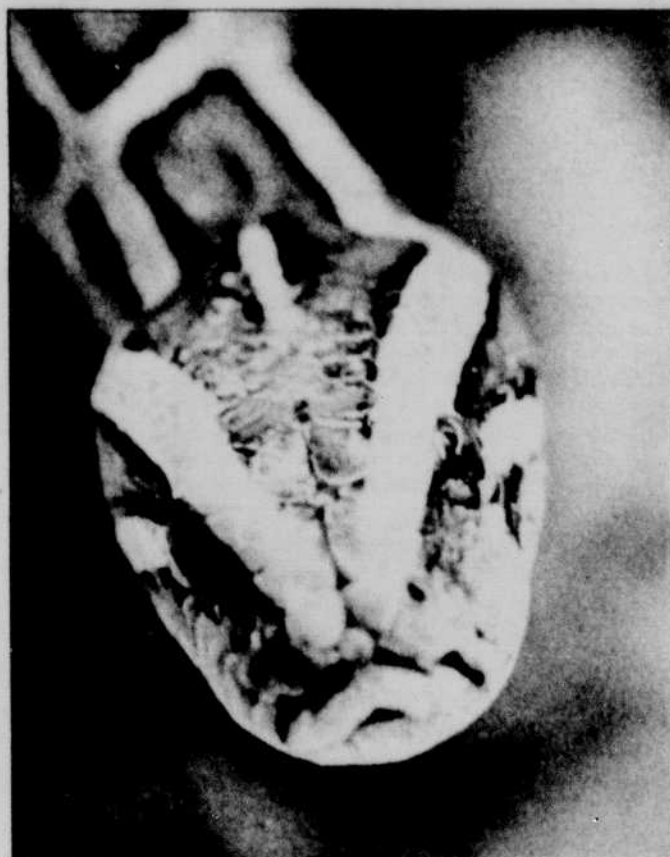
Yet, not all reptiles are low-maintenance lizards, said Chris Howerton, an employee of Little Ocean.

Iguanas, for example, can grow to be 6 feet long, from head to tail, Howerton said. Iguanas also need to be handled frequently, as more human contact leads to a laid-back lizard.

Information such as possible future size is extremely important to know prior to purchasing a pet. In fact, a lack of information often leads to abandoned animals.

"People come in wanting to sell their iguanas because they think the animal is becoming mean," Howerton said. "These

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NATALIE MONTGOMERY/Emerald

A boa constrictor strikes the camera at Little Ocean, a campus-area pet store where many students go for their animal companions.



NATALIE MONTGOMERY/Emerald

Dan Iverson, a sophomore who lives at Chi Psi fraternity, likes to let his ferret run around his room. Iverson's clothes drawer seems to be one of her favorite spots.

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NATALIE MONTGOMERY/Emerald

Matt Ward checks out a tarantula, a common pet for the dorms because of its easy maintenance and small cage (top). A box turtle boldly peers out from its shell as it is held by Chris Howerton, one of Little Ocean's employees.

