

Chester McClain, Lemur

THE BEST WORST PET YOU COULD ASK FOR

by Adrian Black

Gazing into the distance like a sea captain through citrine eyes, crouched confidently atop Nate McClain's head, is Chester, a 9-month-old ring-tailed lemur.

McClain, owner of Zany Zoo, a pet store and sanctuary in Eugene, doesn't bat an eye. He prefers this relative calm to Chester's more rambunctious hijinks. McClain, who keeps several Patagonian maras (something between a rabbit and a kangaroo), says, "If he gets free, he goes right for one, hops on its back and holds on — 8 seconds on a bucking bronco."

Now rolled up in a small, shaggy, chocolate-colored bath rug, Chester peers out bashfully. "Jay, call him," McClain says, as a co-worker approaches: "Meaaaa," the man sounds. "Maaaaw!" Chester returns through a tiny opening.

"That thing was his surrogate mother," McClain says. He's been attached to the blanket from the moment he came home. In December, after careful consideration, McClain and his wife made a trade with a behavioral research and conservation breeding program upstate. For Chester, a lemur, they offered a galago, or bush baby, a similar species.

Because McClain's house is listed as a secondary location for his licensed business, Chester receives lots of special attention. "Everyone asks me if he's a good pet. He's a terrible pet, really," says McClain, who doesn't advocate getting an exotic pet just because it's cute. "I can't go on vacation. He's not allowed in a hotel. It's a lot of responsibility."

"He's a lot of fun to live with. He's a terror sometimes, but we love him," says younger brother Jake McClain, who lives with Nate. The McClains have made every effort to lemur-proof their living room, but they realize they are essentially dealing with a hyperactive and unpredictable child. With a life span roughly one quarter a human's, Chester is still a toddler. In the store, he wears a diaper, which he constantly tries to chew off. Though this may look absurd, Jake McClain sets it straight: "If you walked around with him on your shoulder all day, you'd want that too."

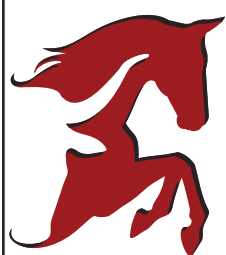
Chester is one of hundreds of animals at Zany Zoo. You can't hear yourself think over the chorus of bird calls in the store from finches, doves and parakeets. "I shy away from any of the big macaws and things like that," Nate McClain says. Giant tropical birds may seem the definition of exotic, but McClain says the much smaller parakeets "learn to talk, come in every imaginable color and won't break the skin." A macaw can keep your finger if it wants to.

Zany Zoo is packed with all manner of rodent rarities, lizards, snakes and more. Though McClain calls a ball python a "good introductory pet snake," his alligators are not for sale, nor are his porcupines. "Hedgehogs, ferrets, possums, chinchillas; all of those make great pets," McClain says. "It's important for people to know the difference, though, between exotic *pets* and exotic *animals*." 🐾

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— NATE MCCLAIN
ZANY ZOO

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