

Owners Tell Why They Chose A Pet Gerbil, Skunk, Pot-Bellied Pig, Short-Tailed Opossum, Hedgehog, Ground Squirrel Or Flying Squirrel

Find out from owners what makes a pet gerbil, skunk, pot-bellied pig, short-tailed opossum, hedgehog, ground squirrel or flying squirrel an irresistible pet.

By Marylou Zarbock

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Why Gerbils?

Gerbil owner Judith H. Block of New York has owned gerbils for more than 30 years. "We're not allowed to have dogs in our apartment building," she said. "Back in 1972, my husband introduced me to gerbils. I had never even heard of them before. They got me at their version of 'Hello.' I just fell in love with them."

Living in an apartment and not being allowed to have cats or dogs also led gerbil breeder Michelle Inman of Illinois to gerbils. "Gerbils were the best choice — low-maintenance, fun to have climb on you."

Rebecca Ward, now a gerbil breeder in Virginia, had gerbils as a child and got involved with them again because of her own child. "My youngest was ready for a more challenging pet than a Siamese fighting fish and wanted a hamster, I steered her toward gerbils. Once I got some in the house, I remembered how much fun they were, and I ended up joining the American Gerbil Society and becoming a registered breeder."

Why Skunks?

Cynthia O. of Michigan got her first pet skunk in 1987, but her affection for these animals began as a child when a baby skunk got into her family's garage and kept returning after being trapped and released.

Deborah Cipriani of Skunk Haven Inc. in Ohio met her first live skunks in the 1980s. "I was camping in Colorado and heard pitter-patter in the back of the tent. I jumped out to see a family of skunks, so I sat there talking to them." She moved to Ohio in 1989 and saw them in the pet store. She bought her first pet skunk in 2000, which soon became ill. She felt helpless trying to get medical aid for her skunk. She didn't want other skunk owners to face the same fate, so she worked with her veterinarian to produce medical standards on skunks for other veterinarians to follow.

Why Pot-Bellied Pigs?

Breeding pot-bellied pigs seemed to be destined for Nancy Shepherd of Pig O' My Heart Potbellies, who bred commercial pigs for many years and developed a lot of respect and a wonderful rapport with them. "To have a small pig was a dream come true for me."

Dottie Eggeman of Nevada has owned pot-bellied pigs since 1991. She runs the website Pigs4ever.com and currently owns three pigs. "I loved pigs no matter the size. The love and bonding with a person and a pig is something very special."

Why Short-Tailed Opossums?

Molly Kalafut of Colorado got her first short-tailed opossum in 2000. She started the short-tailed opossum Yahoo group mailing list in 2003 and launched her KnowYourSTO.com website in 2005. Why did she choose a short-tailed opossum for a pet? "I wanted a small pet because my apartment complex didn't allow dogs or cats, and I was drawn to the ease of care compared to other exotics," she said. Also, its nocturnal nature suits her busy lifestyle.

Why Hedgehogs?

African pygmy hedgehogs came into Z. G. Standing Bear's life in 1996. "I was involved in wolf rescue some years back when my wife came home with a pet hedgehog. I was appalled by the terrible pet care literature on them." He took in one rescue and then more. His rescue currently has 32 hedgehogs, and typically houses 30 to 50. Standing Bear founded and operates The Flash and Thelma Memorial Hedgehog Rescue Inc., in Divide, Colorado.

Why Ground Squirrels?

For Richardson's squirrel owner Andrew Watts of Texas, his interest in all squirrels sparked his interest in ground squirrels.



Ground squirrels hold the attention of Karen Clark of Florida because of her job as a wildlife rehabilitator and founder of Lovely Lita's Sheltering Tree Foundation Inc.

Why Flying Squirrels?

Rescue work brought together flying squirrels and these owners.

Karen Clark, a wildlife rehabilitator in Florida and founder of Lovely Lita's Sheltering Tree Foundation Inc., loved squirrels since she was a child. "When my son was about 8, we found a tiny pinkie squirrel on the ground. We raised him and found it was something that I loved to do. I kept taking in more squirrels and became a licensed rehabber."

A rescue also figures into Shanon Burke's story. This Florida resident got involved in rehabilitating and releasing orphaned or injured Eastern Grey Squirrels when her mother found a baby one after a storm. A friend called her in September 2008 when a neighbor's cat found a mysterious animal. Burke's research at the National Association of Flying Squirrels website confirmed that the animal was a baby Southern flying squirrel. "I also found another website shortly after, www.thesquirrelboard.com, that has been a huge help to me for Teddy [her flying squirrel] and the other squirrels that we have raised."

Carol Witt's job at the Florida Fish And Wildlife Conservation Commission put her in contact with these pets. "People would bring in orphan animals and that's how I came to love them — that and they are simply adorable."