

Stereotyping Small Animals

Unfair stereotypes and prejudices can keep some small animal pets from being adopted.

By Angela Pham

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Photo courtesy of Isabelle Francais / Bowtie Inc.

An albino rabbit is a typical case of an animal at a rescue who would be prejudiced against.

Choosing a small animal pet from a shelter or other adoptive situation requires a prospective pet owner to make a number of judgments based on individual needs. It's a given that an adopter should take into consideration a number of essential factors, such as whether the small animal is child-friendly for a family environment, or whether the species' nutritional needs can be afforded.

Less significant factors also play a role in people's pet preferences. These take a toll on the small animal shelters, which have a difficult time adopting out animals affected by factors that could be labeled prejudices.

At the Rabbit Meadows Adoption Center in Redmond, Washington, and the Best Little Rabbit, Rodent & Ferret House in Seattle, president and owner Sandi Ackerman said common misconceptions propel prejudices against certain small animals.

The public tends to think that the white-furred, red-eyed rabbits, guinea pigs and rodents have something wrong with them, Ackerman said. While she tries to educate people that these are simply color variations within species, such prejudice is a common problem among small animal shelters.

Caroline Charland, founder and owner of The Bunny Bunch in Chino, California, which rescues rabbits and other small animals, like guinea pigs, said she's witnessed the same unfair prejudices against albino small animals. It's a shame, she said, as it's often these white-colored critters that make the best pets.

"I know some people say that the red eyes scare them, which you know is silly," Charland said. "It's like [the superstition] with black cats."

To combat this prejudice, The Bunny Bunch ran a campaign this past holiday season called, "Dreaming of a White Christmas: Adopt a White Rabbit" to encourage potential bunny owners to consider the white ones. The promotion was successful, Charland said. To further emphasize the positive qualities of the red-eyed animals, Charland said she has a potential small pet owner sit down and interact with the rabbit or guinea pig, joking that these critters simply see the world through rose-colored lenses.

The albino prejudice exists also in gerbils, rats and mice. Color preferences, however, do not seem to exist in ferret owners, Ackerman said. She credits the general acceptance and embracing of all colors of ferrets in shows as one reason why color doesn't play as big a role.

While some potential small pet owners may judge a small animal by its color, others might make judgments about size, assuming that the smaller the creature, the easier the upkeep. But this is yet another misconception that animal shelters try to clear up.

With many small animals, their small size is due to their youth. As months go by, their small stature won't last long. Though many people feel infatuation with the cuteness of a baby small animal, Ackerman said the extra problems that come with the babies leave many unprepared small pet owners overwhelmed. Baby guinea pigs, ferrets and rabbits aren't litter trained, chew on everything and require more exercise than adults, she said. She often recommends that new small animal owners look into the older small animal pets.

Even those animals that stay small for life, such as dwarf rabbits, tend to be more hyper and demanding than larger rabbits, Charland added.

But prejudices in the small animal adoption world aren't always based on physical appearance. Small animal shelters can have trouble adopting out animals that don't fit into the idealistic expectations that many ill-informed pet owners might



develop. For example, most guinea pigs don't like being picked up, which can be off-putting to people, Ackerman said.

"People need to understand, that's just their behavior," she said. "Once they are picked up, they will just sit there for hours to be petted. It's primarily just seeing what they like and how to handle them."

Additionally, biting can occur with all small animal pets. While it's not a behavior that any prospective adopter is looking for, Ackerman said it's important that people understand why it happens and that the animals can still be adoptable. Ackerman said most small animals are prey animals that instinctively bite to protect themselves. Small pet owners should not hurt the pet back, which would worsen the behavior. Rather, it's gentleness that can end a biting habit, she said.

Although many adopters seek out a small pet animal that's in perfect health, surprisingly, it's the animals with medical problems that sometimes get adopted more quickly.

At Rabbit Meadows, a bunny with a broken back whose bladder needs to be expressed every day has already found a potential adopter, a person whose cat had the same problem and recently died. The pet owner missed the time spent with their own special-needs cat, Ackerman said, and was willing to take on a similar small animal.

"Often, animals with problems are more easily adopted because people feel sorry for them," Ackerman said. "It's just getting the word out to the right person."

It's word-of-mouth education that is key to ensuring the more "unpopular" small animal pets can still find homes, Charland said.

"Half the time, [people with pet prejudices] don't know why they felt like that in the first place," Charland said.