



**HOLD STILL.** Providing medical care for exotic companion animals presents unique challenges for veterinary nurses, including how to properly restrain and handle them.



**MEET THE AUTHOR**

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## Unique and Unusual: Exotic Animal Medicine

**E**xotic animals, such as small mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish, have become common pets in American households. According to the National Pet Owners Survey, 62 million exotic companion animals resided in US households in 2016, a 25% increase since 2011.<sup>1,2</sup> The surge in ownership of exotic animals has certainly contributed to an increase in owners seeking veterinary care for their pets. Veterinarians and veterinary nurses are finding themselves faced with providing medical care for nontraditional pets, presenting unique challenges for all involved.

Sarah earned a Bachelor of Applied Science in Veterinary Nursing from St. Petersburg College and the Veterinary Technician Specialty (Exotic Companion Animals). She currently works at ISU Lloyd Veterinary Medical Center in Ames, Iowa. She is a member of the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America and International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants. Sarah has written numerous articles and lectured extensively on exotic animal topics. She has fostered birds for the Des Moines Animal Rescue League since 2014. Her interests include avian anatomy, physiology, behavior and enrichment; wildlife rehabilitation; and anesthesia.

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## HANDLE WITH CARE

Veterinary appointments for exotic pets are quite different than dog and cat appointments. Though owner awareness of the importance of annual health exams of exotic animals is increasing, the majority of exotic appointments continue to present as emergency illnesses or traumatic injuries, requiring specialized handling and longer appointment times. Except for ferrets, exotic animals are prey species. In order to survive, exotic animals living in the wild hide signs of illness from predators. This defense mechanism is called the masking phenomenon. When an exotic animal begins to show signs of illness, it is physically unable to mask its symptoms any longer, meaning it is in a fragile state of health, which presents challenges for veterinary professionals. For example, a pet parrot with a respiratory emergency needs to be handled with extreme care. The additional stress due to handling and restraint can cause a bird in respiratory distress to die.

Illness is not the only reason specialized handling and restraint may be required for exotic pets. For example, the veterinary nurse must take care in handling a rabbit to ensure that it is unable to gain leverage off a surface if it were to kick its back legs. Rabbits are at great risk for spinal fractures caused by mishandling or a sudden frightened kick with its hind legs. This is because the bones of rabbits are delicate in comparison with their muscle mass. Hedgehogs may require anesthesia to be able to uncurl their body for examination. An owl that will use its talons in defense cannot be restrained in the same way or manner as a parrot that will use its beak in defense. Mice can be captured by the base of their tail; however, if a gecko is captured by its tail, the tail is likely to fall off. Veterinary nurses must be familiar with handling techniques for various species to prevent injury in either the animal or the handler.

Exotic animal veterinary appointments also differ from dog and cat appointments in the amount of husbandry and nutrition information that must be discussed. Veterinary nurses play an integral role in educating owners about how to provide the best possible environment, enrichment, and nutrition for their exotic pets. It has been reported that over 90% of exotic pet illness is related to poor husbandry or nutrition.<sup>3</sup> A tremendous amount of misinformation can be found on the internet and in pet stores, leading owners astray on how to best care for their exotic pets. As exotic medicine evolves, recommendations made for husbandry and nutrition are also changing. For example, 40 years ago, feeding seed diets to pet parrots

was the recommendation for providing the best nutrition. Now veterinary professionals are diagnosing birds fed seed diets with hypovitaminosis A related to chronic poor nutrition. The feeding recommendation for birds has changed to pelleted diets, which provide better nutrition than seed diets.

A veterinary nurse may be presented with hundreds, or even thousands, of different exotic species, each with its own unique characteristics. For example, the Reptile Database reports 10,793 reptiles in existence as of July 2018.<sup>4</sup> Medical care, husbandry, nutrition, and even anatomy and physiology can differ drastically among 10,793 reptile species. It is impossible to be an expert on such a vast number of species! Rather, veterinary professionals extrapolate information from known

**STRICTLY FOR THE BIRDS.** As exotic medicine evolves, recommendations made for husbandry and nutrition are also changing. For example, feeding seed diets to pet parrots—which are beloved for their beauty and intelligence—was once the recommended diet. Today, seed diets have been linked to poor nutrition and hypovitaminosis A in birds. The feeding recommendation for birds has changed to pelleted diets, which provide better nutrition than seed diets.





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## CAREER CHALLENGES

reptile species to apply to unfamiliar species. Networking among veterinary professionals is important to improve our collective knowledge of exotic animal medicine. By sharing what we see and learn, medical care provided to exotic animals will continue to advance.

## THE ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As a veterinary nurse working with exotic animals, you may also be faced with ethical issues related to keeping these animals as pets. You should ensure the owner has properly researched and prepared for keeping an exotic animal as a pet. Has he or she made provisions for the ideal housing and diet as well as medical care? For example, has the owner properly mimicked a reptile's natural habitat with the use of UVA/UVB bulbs, heating elements, and humidifiers? There are also the ethical questions you will face as a veterinary team, such as whether you'll clip the wing feathers of pet parrots to prevent them from flying. These are just two examples of the concerns that impact the welfare and wellbeing of these animals.

An increasing number of veterinary practices are providing medical care for nontraditional pets. All it takes is one exotic pet in need of medical care to walk, slither, or fly through the door of a veterinary clinic and a team of veterinary professionals willing to learn new things. For me, that one exotic pet was a white rat named Bertie. Bertie presented with a mammary mass that had grown so large, she was unable to use her rear legs. Bertie was diagnosed with a mammary fibroadenoma, becoming the first rat to undergo a mass removal surgery in that veterinary clinic. I was hooked.

Working with exotics can be an amazing learning experience. The variety in species, the continued learning, and witnessing the human-animal bond exist between humans and species that are not a cat or dog is fascinating and exciting! **TVN**

## References

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