

Life with Hedgies

Adopting a hedgehog takes special care, but may be just right for you



AP Photo/Matt Hage

Sarah Markle and Babe the hedgehog at the Alaska Hedgehog Club's open house at the city shelter in Anchorage, Alaska.

► **By Donnasue Graesser, Jennifer Plombon, and Karen Thonet**

Any time a wild animal starts to take off as the “pet du jour,” you can hear welfare groups emit a collective moan. They know what’s coming next. Animals dubbed “cute as buttons” today will be abandoned tomorrow when they seem like too much effort.

Pretty much every type of animal you can imagine has a support group. But one, the Hedgehog Welfare Society (HWS), has been scrambling lately to rescue the latest must-have pet.

In 1996, a front-page article in the *Wall Street Journal* dubbed African pygmy hedgehogs the newest “superpet.” More recently, hedgehogs have become popularized as pets by TV commercials promoting video game sales. Hedgehogs are unique, adorable, and take up little space. They are attractive companions for dorm-dwelling college students and families with children who want an animal that’s easy to care for. But like the Easter bunnies acquired in droves each year, too many hedgehogs purchased on impulse wind up being discarded when it turns out that they aren’t always the ideal pet. That’s because

they basically belong in their own environment in the wild.

Like other exotic pets that end up needing to be rescued, hedgehogs come with some unique challenges. They’re nocturnal – which can be great for those who work all day! But if woken from sleep, they can become quite, shall we say, prickly.

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They have a tendency to be rather unsociable, and can take some time to become accustomed to being handled. So if you’re after something cuddly that will sit on your lap and luxuriate in copious stroking, they’re probably not the best choice for you. They tend to poop on the go, but, like cats, require a clean environment, so cages

and wheels require diligent daily cleaning. When stressed or ill, they contract mites relatively easily. Veterinary bills are generally higher for exotic animals, and many people have difficulty finding a vet who has experience in treating hedgehogs. They can live up to eight years with proper diet and exercise, so parents should consider what will happen when Billy Jr. transcends the terrible teens and moves away to college. And if a family adopts a hedgehog for a child, parents must absolutely be the primary caregivers, overseeing a child’s involvement.

But for those who are game to take on the responsibility of proper care, an adopted hedgehog can be a delightful pet. You’ll have to forgive their lingering wild traits since they’ve only been domesticated for about 10 years. But like all animals, hedgies have individual personalities. Many love to snuggle, curling up around a warm neck or in the crook of an arm. And then there are the budding Olympic athlete hedgies: those that just can’t sit still and will careen around the house, climbing on anything that’s climbable, and roaming from room to room. Some love to be picked up, and the moment you enter a room will walk straight into your hand, while others are a bit grumpy and prefer a more hermetic lifestyle. You can tell that a hedgehog is scared by the way it rolls into a ball to protect itself.

Adopting the right hedgehog for you is just as important as adopting the right cat or dog. The Hedgehog Welfare Society is the perfect place to start if you’re thinking of giving a hedgehog a home. They have been rescuing abandoned hedgehogs and working to re-home them with families who are more educated in their care. The group has a network of rescuers throughout the U.S. and Canada, along with relay teams that can help transport hedgehogs to their new adoptive homes, and plenty of literature and support about how to make you and your hedgehog very happy.

If you think you might be a hedgie person, the Hedgehog Welfare Society has just the one for you! 🐾

For more information, visit the web site at www.hedgehogwelfare.org, or write to P.O. Box 206603, New Haven, CT 06520-6603.

You can also become part of the HWS rescue-station network. For more information, contact Yolanda_McLean@biogen.com (east coast) or sshalimar16@juno.com (west coast).

There’s a hedgehog discussion group at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/hedgehogwelfare>.