

Trends

magazine



EYES ON EXOTICS

Add Spice to Your Practice with Exotics **28**

Class of the Pandemic
New Grads Face Unique Challenges **36**



EYES ON EXOTICS

Add Spice to Your Practice with Exotics

by Jen Reeder



“Exotic pets deserve the same high-quality care that dogs and cats do.”

—JENNY HERBERT, DVM

WHEN CRAIG BLAIR, DVM, WAS A YOUNG BOY GROWING UP IN RURAL Appalachia, his best friend was a pet duck named Huey.

One day, Huey had an altercation with a predator that left him with a gaping chest wound. Blair’s mother called the only veterinarian in the area and begged him to help.

“He literally laughed at us over the phone and declared that he didn’t work on ducks,” Blair recalled. “Mom helped me tape up the wound and we nursed Huey back to health. I swore that day that I would never refuse to see any kind of animal.”

Blair became a veterinarian and has kept that promise—“within the bounds of common sense, legality, and sanity.” The co-owner of AAHA-accredited Clays Mill Veterinary Clinic in Lexington, Kentucky, Blair treats not only cats and dogs but also a wide range of exotic animals, such as primates, kangaroos, rodents, rabbits, fish, insects, herptiles, and birds ranging from hummingbirds to ostriches.

In one case about 20 years ago, a client drove an ostrich with an abscess to the practice. The bird was eight feet tall and weighed more than 300 pounds. The team anesthetized the ostrich, then evacuated and debrided the abscess. The big bird woke up toward the end of the procedure and kicked a hole in the wall; Blair’s assistants restrained the ostrich while Blair finished suturing.

“Caring for exotic pets is a very satisfying/exasperating, fulfilling/frustrating, financially rewarding/irresponsible aspect of my practice life,” Blair quipped. “I do it because there is something deep within me that compels me to do it.”

Exotic pet care is not for the faint of heart. But for passionate veterinarians and their teams, it can offer challenges and rewards as unique as the animals themselves.

Jenny Herbert, DVM, co-owner of AAHA-accredited Arbor View Animal Hospital in Valparaiso, Indiana, said all seven veterinarians on her team have a strong interest in exotic animal medicine. Patients range from small mammals like rabbits and guinea pigs or reptiles



Bearded dragon with an eye infection
Photo courtesy of Clays Mill Veterinary Clinic



New-pet exam for a hypomelanistic striped corn snake
Photo courtesy of Idaho Veterinary Hospital



An arowana receiving surgery for a perforated stomach
Photo courtesy of Clays Mill Veterinary Clinic



Markey Bierman, DVM, with a saw-whet owl
Photo courtesy of Idaho Veterinary Hospital

like bearded dragons and geckos to ferrets, chinchillas, pot-bellied pigs, kinkajous, foxes, raccoons, tarantulas, and bees (which require house calls). One veterinarian is certified in aquatic veterinary medicine and treats fish.

“I like to spice up my life with exotics because I think I’d be bored if I saw dogs and cats every day,” she said. “I just love it.”

Unique Opportunities

Treating exotics can lead to viral social media posts. In one instance, Herbert was fixing the wing of a juvenile bald eagle who had been hit by a car. The practice put out a call on Facebook for fresh fish to feed the bird and was inundated with donations. One man even loaded buckets of fish into the back of a boat that he towed through the practice’s drive-through pharmacy.

Herbert said she enjoys knowing so much about the husbandry of different species and thinking about the best way to treat whoever comes through her door.

“A lot of times, you can do the same things that you would do on a dog or cat, but you have to think about the how,” she explained. “If you’re going to take X-rays, is this something that you have to sedate? For example, a snake. You can put them in a clear tube and take an X-ray, and they don’t seem to need [sedation]. But that’s how you straighten them out to get a nice clear X-ray.”

Arbor View provides all the after-hours emergency exotic care for northwest Indiana, and many clients travel for their services. Herbert stressed the importance of building trust with clients by delivering top-notch care.

“Exotic pets deserve the same high-quality care that dogs and cats do,” she said. “That’s our mentality here.”

That approach helps build trust with clients like Tracey Stevens, who has brought her bunnies and birds to Arbor View Animal Hospital for nearly a decade. The team has treated Walter, her African gray parrot, for pneumonia and a concussion; her rabbit, Radar, for a urinary tract infection, ear infections, and gastrointestinal stasis; and her sun conure Pollyanne for a severe viral infection.

“I was sobbing because I didn’t trust myself to bring her home because I didn’t know what to watch for overnight,”

she recalled. “Dr. Herbert was so kind that she took my bird home to her house. She texted me updates throughout—late at night, early in the morning—and then returned her to me the next afternoon.”

Often, the bond between people and their pets can be stronger with exotics than with cats and dogs, in part because some species have such long life spans (plus some birds can even communicate with language), according to Laurie Hess, DVM, DABVP (Avian), owner and medical director of AAHA-accredited Veterinary Center for Birds and Exotics in Bedford Hills, New York, and author of *Unlikely Companions: The Adventures of an Exotic Animal Doctor*.

Hess features Dale, her parrot of 26 years—“I’ve had him longer than I’ve had my children”—in educational videos for clients, which cover topics like how to give medications or set up a cage. In fact, she said education is the word that best describes her practice.

“They’re really phenomenal animals all in their own way, all these different animals,” she said. “We can provide wonderful lives for them, but we have to know about what those needs are . . . whether it’s regarding nutrition or caging or stimulation and enrichment.”

People sometimes lack an understanding of their pets before bringing them home. One client didn’t know that rats naturally have yellow teeth and asked to have her rat’s teeth whitened.

More seriously, others don’t consider the need for enrichment or how to deal with changes that might occur in a pet’s personality over time. Hess noted that when a parrot becomes seven to eight years old, they may become sexually frustrated by not mating with their owner and start screaming, picking out feathers, and biting.

Growing Demand

One way or another, the demand for exotic pet care continues to grow. Hess opened her exotics-only practice 11 years ago with a staff of just herself and one veterinary technician. It’s grown to four veterinarians, three techs, and a dozen staff members with a database of 4,000–5,000 clients. The team works six days a week and is on call 24/7.



This tortoise needed surgery for a softball-sized bladder stone
Photo courtesy of Clays Mill Veterinary Clinic



Technician Jen with Marley, the hyacinth macaw
Photo courtesy of Idaho Veterinary Hospital



Splint repair for a green tree frog with a fractured leg
Photo courtesy of Idaho Veterinary Hospital



Technician Eryn with a leopard gecko, in for a hemipenile obstruction
Photo courtesy of Idaho Veterinary Hospital



Syringe-feeding a lizard with a fracture
Photo courtesy of Veterinary Center for Birds & Exotics



Darcy Stephenson, DVM, cares for Sphinx after a dental procedure
Photo courtesy of Arbor View Animal Hospital



Johanna Nimeth, DVM, knows that ferrets can be a handful
Photo courtesy of Arbor View Animal Hospital



A blue-fronted Amazon in for a wellness exam
Photo courtesy of Idaho Veterinary Hospital

While a few technicians have left the practice because they missed seeing cats and dogs, the current “amazing” team shares Hess’s passion for exotic pet care, and she plans to expand to a larger facility soon. That enthusiasm is an important element since exotic animal medicine, even for a successful practice, doesn’t typically pay as well as dog and cat medicine.

“We’re doing well as a hospital, but you’re not going to make half a million dollars as a veterinarian doing exotics,” she said. “It’s something you do because you love it.”

Matthew Demey, DVM, owner of AAHA-accredited Seven Hills Veterinary Hospital in Aurora, Colorado, said when he joined the practice in 2000, he had a strong interest in exotics.

“I got to the point where we were doing parakeet spays and taking kidney tumors out of kingsnakes and things like that,” he recalled.

But his interest slowly migrated from exotics to orthopedic surgery. When the practice’s former partners retired several years ago, Demey became the only veterinarian on the team still seeing birds and lizards and one of the only ones performing orthopedic surgeries.

He had to choose his priority—and his practice stopped seeing new birds and reptiles at the start of 2021. He does still see long-term avian and reptile patients and continues to volunteer for the nonprofit Raptor Education Foundation for fun.

His advice to practice owners pondering a move to exotic care: Consider the cost of investing in equipment and whether there is enough potential clientele in the area to support it.

Julia Katzenbach, DVM, associate veterinarian at AAHA-accredited Mesa Veterinary Hospital in Golden, Colorado, said clients travel from surrounding cities, mountain towns, and even Kansas for exotic care at the practice.

She considers a mouth speculum for looking into the mouths of rodents and rabbits an indispensable piece of equipment, as well as spatulas to open reptile mouths, and oxygen cages.

Practices offering surgery for exotics will also need special equipment for intubation—and training. Katzenbach said training can help keep teams engaged at work. In fact, two technicians recently joined the practice for the chance to work with exotic pets.

“I think having the variability makes it more enjoyable for our employees, and they get to learn,” she said. “I really like to teach, so that is a big draw for me with exotics.”

She also enjoys teaching children about their new pets. Some kids are so delighted that they bring reports or posters they’ve created about their hamster, guinea pig, or rabbit.

“I’m not a huge kid person, but I get really excited talking to a little girl about her new bunny,” she said. “They are often so excited and they come in with all this research, and they really want to talk to you about what kind of food it eats and to learn about proper care.”

Being able to discuss husbandry with clients of all ages is key, so Katzenbach keeps handouts available and makes time for those discussions. She also offers grooming services for patients who are current on exams, since exotics—which are typically prey species—can be so good at hiding illness.

Jessica Schult, DVM, associate veterinarian at AAHA-accredited Idaho Veterinary Hospital in Nampa, Idaho, has been seeing exotics almost exclusively for the past year. She said it benefits the practice to offer exotic care since many clients also have dogs and cats.

“There is good overlap for sure,” she said. “I think people do enjoy the one-stop-shop ability.”

The practice introduced exotic pet care to the Boise area in 1990, when John Calhoun, VMD, now owner, joined the team. Fortunately, he’s never seen a suspected case of illegal trafficking, which he would report to the US Fish and Wildlife Service. The bigger problem is people deciding they no longer want an exotic pet and releasing a nonnative species into the wild.

Like other veterinarians, Calhoun stressed the need to educate owners—and potential owners—about proper



A Malayan horned frog, brought in for treatment of a prolapse
Photo courtesy of Clays Mill Veterinary Clinic



Smaug, a uromastyx, in for a nail trim and to confirm he is a male
Photo courtesy of Arbor View Animal Hospital



Technician Heidi with “Ace” the rat, in for respiratory issues
Photo courtesy of Idaho Veterinary Hospital



“Penelope” the hedgehog, in for a wellness exam
Photo courtesy of Idaho Veterinary Hospital

Considerations for Expanding to Offer Exotic Pet Care

Jenny Herbert, DVM, co-owner of AAHA-accredited Arbor View Animal Hospital in Valparaiso, Indiana, said there are numerous questions to consider before expanding to offer exotic care.

- Where will you send your exotic pets for referral or hospitalization if your practice is not open 24/7?
- Do you know an expert to call for particularly tough cases?
- Do you have veterinarians who want to see exotics and have an interest in learning about them?
- Will you and your team pursue continuing education with organizations like the Association of Reptile and Amphibian Veterinarians, the Association of Avian Veterinarians, and the Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians?
- Can you handle the investment in special equipment, such as heat lamps, tiny catheters, and cages without bars (plexiglass, etc.)?
- Do you have an in-house or reference lab that can handle small sample sizes and that routinely looks at exotic samples?
- Will you train your staff to work with exotics, since restraint is so different from handling a cat or dog?
- Are you prepared to invest in special food or medicines that might expire or go unused if you don't treat a certain species regularly?

"If you see enough exotics, then I think that it's definitely a revenue source that can justify the cost associated with seeing them, as well as diversify your client base," she concluded.

care throughout an animal's lifetime. After more than three decades, he still enjoys helping strengthen the human-animal bond and caring for exotic pets.

"I have a motto: 'When you stop being interested, you probably need to stop practicing,' because this is all about being interested and being passionate about what we do," he said. "Exotic medicine offers a tremendous amount of variety and a tremendous amount of ability to learn new things." ❄



As a child, Jen Reeder named her cat Fluff because he was fluffy, and her turtle Shelly because of her shell. She's tried to be more creative ever since.

