

ROWAN ANIMAL TALK

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Which Pet is Best?

Pets come in many sizes, breeds, species, and kind. Statistics from the 2007 National Pet Owners Survey show that for overall numbers of one type of pet in the United States by far the largest number belongs to freshwater fish. Of course most people that have aquariums keep many fish in one aquarium. And aquariums can often be kept in apartments and places that are not the best for other pets. That same survey showed that American pet owners kept 88.3 million cats, 74.8 million dogs, 16 million birds, 24.3 million small animals (rabbits, hamsters, gerbils, etc.), 13.8 million horses, 13.4 million reptiles, and 9.6 million saltwater fish.



One thing that is apparent to me over the last twenty one years working with animals for Rowan County is that regardless of the type an animal a pet owner chooses to keep, sometimes there seems to be not enough advanced planning. Often a decision is made based on the “cool” factor of a pet without finding out exactly what that animal may need as an environment which could include many different factors such as social attention, space, exercise, grooming, specialized food, heat, cool, light, and many other things. Choosing the wrong pet can make for a poor life for the animal. A Siberian husky is not designed to live a comfortable life in the heat outside of a North Carolina summer. Neither is a small short haired dog designed to live outside in our winters. It’s not just a factor of how much we love the animals or even want to have one, we have to be prepared to provide for their needs.



Often Hollywood causes an interest in a particular breed or type of animal. When I was young, back in the dinosaur age, Disney’s “101 Dalmatians” and “That Darn Cat” caused the popularity of Dalmatians and Siamese cats to go through the roof. Americans, by the way, are not the only society subject to this situation. A 1977 Japanese anime TV adaptation of American author Sterling North’s story of his pet raccoon Rascal led to the importation of hundreds of raccoons into Japan. While very cute on film and as a cartoon, raccoons do not make good household pets. Many were released and have established a feral population that is causing problems for Japanese wildlife, farmers, and property owners.

Back in the earlier days at Dan Nicholas Park Barnyard, we kept a room of abandoned exotic pet animals that was mostly made up as a display to show people what some popular exotic pets needed and how they may not be such a good choice for most. A great example was our iguana. He was about 5 feet long and like most adult male iguanas a little bit ill sometimes. Armed with tree climbing, non-retractable claws and very serious bite strength, he was not the best pet for cuddling. Of course he was pretty cool to look at. But even at that he needed his space to be heated always to 85 degrees or better, special sunlight equivalent lighting, and higher humidity. And at 5 feet he really needed a cage that was at least large closet sized.

With certain animals, little details that are forgotten can be a big problem. Once, years ago, we got a call from a gentleman in Winston Salem that wanted to give us a beautiful 13 foot long Burmese python. We had

no place to house the snake at the time but I offered to transport it and rehome it to another snake lover in Raleigh. He had owned the snake from a hatchling and had built a very nice large housing for it inside of his house. One day, he had come in to feed it. Prior to opening the feeding door, the man had been handling the food for the snake. When he opened the door, the snake smelled food, saw movement, and struck the man in the chest and did its best to take him down and start constricting him. Fortunately the man was a large muscular guy and most importantly, the snake did not have a good hold and he was able to get free. He was alone in the house and that situation could have ended very differently but he was lucky. This was not because this was a bad snake. Snakes are just working mostly on senses and instinct. It was just trying to get its food. The details do matter.

So expectations of behavior also really do matter when choosing pet. Some dogs are designed to be lap dogs. Some dogs are designed to be working dogs. If you have a small apartment or don't live where you can provide a large exercise area or don't have the time to really provide exercise, then an Australian cattle dog or some other such hard working mentally driven dog breed is not for you.

Many experts consider the best family pet to be a mixed breed dog. However, if you are determined that you want a pure breed, always make sure to research the behaviors and needs of that breed of that specific breed before your make your choice. Another really important thing that deserves your attention when looking at pure breed dogs or cats, is to take a close look at where you are getting the animal. Some breeders are just people that love animals, love a particular kind of animal, and want to share that love with the world. Some, though, just like the financial benefit of breeding a costly highly desirable item that they can sell. So be responsible in your choice.



UPDATE ON FREEDOM

After traveling a couple of thousand miles since summer, going all the way to the Canadian wilderness and back to near Charleston, SC.

Freedom has spent the last two days on High Rock Lake about three miles from his hatching place at Dan Nicholas Park.

Welcome home, Freedom!