

November 2012

PET GAZETTE

7

Hedgehogs, Furtive, Nocturnal Pets



By Greg Mertz

I think the best name I have ever heard for a pet is “Inspector” and it was applied to a hedgehog. That name sums up the personality of hedgehogs. Other usual names that I hear for these creatures are “Prickles,” “Sticky,” “Hedgey,” and “Sue.”

Hedgehogs are interesting, furtive pets. If you work at home on the night shift hedgehogs may be the perfect pet. They are nocturnal. They stay up all night. During the day they are asleep, wrapped in a coat of quills. At night they are busy, busy bodies.

I had a hedgehog once. It came as an older adult. It was four-years-old, and in hedgehog years that is geriatric. It lived about another year before passing on, to, I am guessing, Hell. It did not like me. It did not like the dog, or the parrots, or the kids. It didn't like any other living creature as far as I could tell.

In his defense he had been rooted from a comfortable life far after all of his routines, habits, likes and dislikes had been established and plopped down into our house. We had few rules for our pets. Live and let live was our policy. So when Prickles set himself free in the house, no one

could capture him again. This is an issue with hedgehog ownership. Once in a tight spot with prickles out, it is almost impossible to extract one without their wanting to be extracted.

He took up residence in a sofa. (Inside, not on it or under it, but in it.) He crawled through the under-webbing and into the inner workings of the sofa. None of us had the stamina or callus to rescue him. From then on a dish of water and a small bowl of food would be put out for him every day or so. On occasion one of us in the house would see him flash by. That was pretty much it until his natural demise a year or so later.

One night, during one of his flash-byes at about 3 AM, I had an opportunity to watch him in motion. I was working quietly on the computer and Prickles came racing by on stick legs inspecting this and that. I sat perfectly still and watched him investigate every crumb, spot and ant in the entire room. When finally I moved he did not scurry away, he simply rolled into a ball of quills and made huffing, chattering noises. When I sat still long enough he upped himself on his four stick legs and took off.

My experience is not typical. I did not select him, he did not select me. At best, we co-habited the same space. We inspected him; he inspected our leftovers.

People who have hedgehogs and mutually select them

invariably love them. Hedgehog owners are generally affable, unprickly and outgoing people. They say people are like their pets, but in the case of hedgehog owners I can't say there is a big resemblance, except maybe in one case. Years ago I had a client who had a hedgehog and a variety of venomous reptiles. She had the personality of Prickles rolled into a ball.

Contrary to common sense, hedgehogs are not related to porcupines. They are in their own taxonomic group which has evolved a similar protection plan of the porcupines and the echidnas. Altogether there are 17 species of hedgehogs.

The spines are made of hair that is hollow and stiffened with keratin. The tips of the quills are sharp and can cause, in some people, a red itchy flare on the skin. It is argued that this is not an allergy to the hedgehog but to the bacteria and other dirt that they carry on their spines. I watch young girls and boys pick them up in their bare hands without showing any discomfort. I have to use a towel to handle them when examining. I swear they put more jab to the quill when they know it is me.

The care of hedgehogs is relatively simple. It is no more complicated than that of a pet rat, hamster or guinea pig. Early on they need lots of human interaction and handling to sweeten their personalities. If you get them when they are young and start

handling then, they will rapidly get used to you and other family members. I have only ever been bitten once, and that was twenty some years ago. I think he was a particularly cranky hog.

Hedgehogs are omnivores and should be fed cat food mixed with fruits and veggies. They love to eat insects. The hedgehog in its natural environments will explore large areas covering several miles of running each night. They should be given as much room as possible and a wheel to exercise on. Shredded paper or aspen shavings are the best bedding materials. Never use cedar or pine shavings. The fumes from these can irritate the air passageways.

The most common diseases of hedgehogs include mites, gastrointestinal carcinomas, diarrhea, and trauma. If you see flakey skin, itching, diarrhea, growths in the mouth or limping, a visit to the veterinarian is wise. Hedgehogs do not like to be cold. Keep them above 68 degrees Fahrenheit.

A word of caution about using wire running wheels is in order. I have treated a number of broken legs on hedgehogs which had been running on big wire wheels. They stop running, suddenly, and the foot falls between the rung and the wheel momentum fractures the leg. Use a flat plastic wheel. Although messy, it is much safer to use. Each day the wheel should be washed to get rid of urine and stool that accu-

mulates on the wheel during the run. In the wild when they urinate and defecate while running they run away from the mess. Not so, on a wheel.

They have an interesting behavior called anointing. If a hedgehog encounters a new scent or substance they will froth and paint the saliva mixed with the new scent onto their sides. They look like crazy pigs when they do this. The explanation for this is muddled. It might be a way of camouflaging their odor.



Nine-year-old Elizabeth Bennett of Milton, MA recommends pet hedgehog ownership. She thinks Buffy, her pet hedgehog, is “really cute.” Asked what the downside of having a pet hedgehog is, she says, “She goes in my Uggs and I can't get her out. And, oh yeah, she poops in there, too.”

Who knew? Me and hedgehogs with the same sense of fashion!

Follow Greg Mertz on Twitter @Oddpetvet, like The New England Wildlife Center on Facebook, and log onto NEWildlife.org to follow other animal stories.