

Exotic doc

Whether it's a carpet python with a skin condition or a pet rat with a respiratory infection, this veterinarian will treat the malady



For Greg A. Mertz, a routine day includes mending the cracked beak of a parrot. (Trista Allman for the Boston Globe)

By [Robert Knox](#)

Greg Mertz is not the sort of veterinarian who is satisfied with clipping a dog's toenails. That's too mundane.

On a recent Sunday, Mertz could be found shaving and repairing the broken beak of an old parrot and giving a ball python a shot.

A few weeks before, his patient was a duck whose owner noticed that his web-footed friend was waddling off balance.

Mertz performed an X-ray and discovered the duck had swallowed five or six sheetrock screws, a dime, a piece of a beer bottle, staples, and other metal bits. He performed surgery to remove the debris from the patient's stomach. The duck recovered.

To Mertz, the veterinarian behind the Odd Pet Vet practice in Weymouth, the appeal of exotic pets goes beyond a taste for the strange and wondrous.

He figures that anyone who owns a ball python or an iguana or a leopard gecko or a bearded dragon must be in touch with an inner soul that loves nature.

(continued) “They have a real tie and a real affection for Mother Earth,” said Mertz, who repairs and heals exotic pets and injured wildlife at the practice, which is located at the New England Wildlife Center.

A naturalist and educator who worked at the Smithsonian and other museums before a mid-career course correction took him to veterinary school at Tufts, Mertz, 60, is a patient man who is partial to baseball caps. He said he turns everything he does in his fee-for-service Odd Pet Vet practice and his work for the nonprofit New England Wildlife Center into an opportunity to educate the human community about wildlife and the natural world.

The only comprehensive facility of its kind in the state, the Wildlife Center treats 4,000 animals, either from the wild or pets, a year in a 24,000-square-foot, three-story building in South Weymouth.

“Everything we do at the Wildlife Center, it’s an educational process. We’re teaching the biology of life on Earth,” said Mertz. All the center’s rooms have windows to allow observers to watch, he said. All its activities are “transparent” and open to all.

“When somebody comes in with a pet, we use that opportunity to teach the client and his family,” and all the other pet owners in the waiting room, “who cluster and participate,” Mertz said.

Besides, Mertz asks: “Where do you take a pet rat? Where do you take a carpet python?”

One of the most formidable of exotic pets, the carpet python ranges from 6 to 12 feet long and is one of the largest snakes it is legal to own in the United States, the veterinarian said.

Less spectacular but still beyond the range of most veterinary practices are the birds, rodents, and reptiles that stream into the Wildlife Center.

Each species group has a characteristic set of common problems, Mertz said. Take reptiles, for example. They shed skin in sheets, and so skin problems show up frequently. Respiratory problems and parasites affect them, too.

The stress of being in captivity is generally a contributor to health problems in all exotic pets, he said. Breathing problems caused by infections are common in gerbils, rats, guinea pigs, hamsters, and mice. Caused by bacteria, these are highly treatable with antibiotics, Mertz said.

Patients from the avian world include chickens (increasingly a suburban and urban pet), cockatiels, parrots, and ducks, vulnerable to parasites and damaged beaks.

Most exotic pets are considered prey animals, which tend to hide their symptoms, since in the wild any sign of weakness may draw the attention of predators. So, Mertz says, owners need to

know what normal is, and if they see symptoms such as breathing hard, lots of dandruff, or unformed stool, they should make an appointment.

But everyone, whether they own exotic pets or not, needs to learn about wildlife and nature, said the center's executive director, Katrina Bergman. The heart of the center's mission, education about wildlife and the biology of the natural world, has become increasingly important in today's urban-centered world, Bergman said.

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"People don't go outside anymore," Bergman said. She worries about a decline in curiosity about wilderness and wildlife caused by our reliance on technology and man-made environments. "Everything is artificial."

A group of schoolchildren taken recently for a walk in the woods, for example, "didn't even want to get off the path," Bergman said. "That's sad."

That's why the New England Wildlife Center uses animal medical care to develop stewards of wildlife and habitat. In addition to the pets brought to the Odd Pet Vet, it treats "animals dragged in by the car, animals hit in the road, animals poisoned by pesticides," Bergman said.

"The center integrates the teaching of science — especially biology — to children with other academic disciplines and community needs," Bergman said.

In a current project, children and volunteers are preparing an anthology of stories and pictures about raccoons as "ambassadors" of wildlife's ability to adapt and survive in a changing environment.

The center also teaches wildlife care to the 25 undergraduate interns chosen to work at the center from the many who apply from top schools. Another group of high school interns, plus a core of 50 to 60 regular volunteers, also learn about nature by helping out at the center.

The center built its certified energy-efficient facility three years ago on 12 acres of donated land at 500 Columbian St. The facility has benefited from generous donations and is entirely dependent on private funding, and fund-raising, but keeping it going is a full-time chore, Bergman said.

And while many of its wildlife cases suffer from contacts with people — a mother raccoon killed by traffic leaves orphaned babies; a snapping turtle swallows a fish hook — sick and injured animals alert people to environmental problems that can harm us as well. In one case, Canada geese dropped dead in Hingham from ingesting chemical pesticide applied to a lawn, a reminder that pesticides can be dangerous to humans, too.

"Wildlife is the canary in the mine shaft," Bergman said, "but they don't come with health insurance. I beg for every dollar."

Robert Knox can be reached at rc.knox2@gmail.com. ■