

NEW ENGLAND WILDLIFE CENTER

Stories

Veterinarians, like most other people, gather stories. They give us a perspective on the human race if not the whole living ball of wax. Things that make you wonder.

If you were to ask a group of veterinarians to tell you their most entertaining veterinary stories, I think you would discover a treasure trove of oddities. There are some whoppers. My favorite is a recently circulated photograph on the web of an x-ray of a pine snake that had swallowed two light bulbs, whole. Try searching 'scienceray.com' and add 'gulp swallowed' to the category and you will see the web site page for this x-ray and lots of other swallowed items.

They break into three categories: 1.) medical stories, 2.) people stories, and 3.) animal stories.

Medical stories are often technical. How could a fox with a packed cell volume of seven survive? How do reptile mites survive on hamsters? These types of stories don't get much traction except when two veterinarians get together and start gossiping.

In the people stories category, there is the lady who casually took off her blouse in the exam room to have me look at a scratch inflicted by her cat in the middle of her back (no bra, no camisole). There are stories of big, macho, tattooed biker guys reduced to tears over the death of their pet hamster or mouse, and stories of people who have taken in wild pigeons. One lived in the kitchen free to fly wherever he wanted for 13 years. One client is homeless and the pigeon goes with her wherever she goes. There is the lady who had more than 40 pet rats who all lived free and un-caged in her apartment. There is the guy who ate his pet snapping turtle, and the couple who have raised the world's largest snapping turtle: 69 pounds. There is the lady who brought in a crow with a broken wing who told us we needed to do everything we could to save him because this was her husband.

Animal stories are fun. I remember a ring-billed gull that presented with a broken wing and once we examined him closely realized that he had no feet. He had been living outdoors, wild and successful, for at least several months if not years, by the looks of the scars, on just peg legs. He could run well, click,click,click, down the exam room floor, but how did he swim? He was fat and sassy.

I remember an alligator that had eaten the heating element off his aquarium including the glass encasement, the dial, the rubber suction cups and the wire and plug. He presented because he had stopped eating.

Once a young man brought me a 2 ½ foot long *Boa constrictor*. Everything about this snake was normal except about 1/3 of the way down the snake, there was a tremendous bulge about the size of a soft ball. The snake's normal diameter was that of a garden hose. Right off the bat the client said, straight faced, "he swallowed my underwear."

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Boas, and all snakes are strict carnivores and underwear just doesn't seem like meat. Boas like their food to be warm and slightly larger than their head. Boas, and all snakes, eat their food in one bite. Once they begin to eat something they only have two choices: to swallow the whole thing or to spit it out.

Boas have approximately 60 teeth in their mouth, and the taller outer ones are curved backwards towards the back of the throat, so once snagged the snake was obligated to swallow mouse and underwear.

We did surgery and removed the underwear through two incisions: one in the body wall and the other in the intestinal tract. The thing that keeps this story fresh in my repertoire, is that the client asked directly and urgently to get his underwear back.

Another incident that, stands out in my memory, involves a bird and an elderly women's hair. I am guessing that she was in her seventies and had hair that was normally tucked up in a bun, but on this occasion dropped almost to the floor! She came into the exam room empty handed. My client said, "Can you help me untangle Pippy my parakeet?" And sure enough there was Pippy suspended halfway down her back completely entangled in her hair. I extricated Pippy by giving my client a bad and limited hair cut. It took me another one-half hour to cut and untie the hair that had enmeshed Pippy's legs, wings and neck. It is not the act of the bird that caught my attention but the grace and the compassion with which the woman presented her prized hair for cutting.

Every day a new story comes through the door. Some are dramatic, some are usual. Earlier this morning, a guinea pig who crawled into a tube and then couldn't get out again presented for carpentry. It is quite a girdle, and until we saw the tube in half he is today's story.

People and animals.