

Too Cute for the Room?

Chinchillas are an adorable handful, in or out of the shelter

BY JAMES HETTINGER

Acquiring a pet chinchilla? It's a lot like falling in love. At first, all you see is the good stuff. The big, goopy eyes. The soft furball of a body. The undeniable cuteness.

But when you get them home, complications arise.

They'll come to you, but only when they feel like it. They're not big on cuddling. Mainly they want to run around. You discover that they've got some odd quirks. They bathe in dust. Their teeth never stop growing.

And they live for a long time—maybe 20 years—which can leave a potential owner wondering, “Am I really ready for this?”

In many cases, the answer is “no.” But some people don't realize that until they've already gotten one.

The consequences of those uninformed decisions can be significant: Some shelter and small-animal rescue groups report seeing more chinchillas surrendered than ever before. The reason, representatives say, is two-pronged: Pet stores and websites are moving greater numbers of the exotic rodents into homes, and the new owners often don't understand their care requirements.

“Chinchillas, they're adorable, which is kind of their downfall,” says Michelle Clowe, the chinchilla coordinator for Small Angels Rescue, a Frederick, Md.-based group that handles many kinds of little critters. “... They look like cartoon characters. They are ridiculous. And people see 'em, and they're different, and they're cute, and they're very, very, very soft. People are like, ‘Well, I want that,’ and they don't do appropriate research.”

Chinchillas are not so much high maintenance as they are misunderstood, experts say. In many ways, chinchillas are simply not like most other companion animals: They live longer than hamsters, are less sociable than dogs or cats, and have more extensive care needs than guinea pigs. Due to the animals' care challenges and the many problems with the exotic pet industry, The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) recommends chinchillas not be kept as pets. But if one turns up at your shelter, you can provide counseling to those rare adopters who are prepared to get beyond the cute factor and cater to the critter's needs.

Rodents of the Highlands

Compared to the millennia-old relationships between dogs and cats and humans, chinchillas are newcomers to the companion animal scene. They haven't been kept as pets for long, and even those animals in the pet trade retain many of their wild traits.

The species originally hailed from the Andes mountains region of South America. Their exceedingly soft coats made them attractive to the fur industry, which nearly slaughtered chinchillas into extinction after

their fur became popular in Europe in the 1700s and 1800s, according to Dean M. Warren's *Small Animal Care & Management*. South American governments eventually banned the killing, but encouraged trapping for raising chinchillas in captivity. The modern chinchilla industry began in the first quarter of the 20th century when a copper company mining engineer named Mathias F. Chapman got permission from the Chilean government to capture several animals and transport them to the United States for breeding. As the number of chinchillas increased, Warren writes, some became available as pets. *The Merck/Merial Manual for Pet Health*, published in 2007, reported that there are about 3,000 ranches in the U.S. and Canada that breed chinchillas, and the animals have become increasingly popular as pets.

“They're not really domesticated,” concedes Suzanne D'Alonzo, education and training service manager for the Animal Welfare League of Alexandria (AWLA) in Virginia. “No, they're little wild animals, but then so are hamsters, and so are gerbils. Mice and rats really are, too.”

Rather than taking the “radical approach” of advocating that no one should

With their thick, soft coats, chinchillas resemble balls of fur, but like other rodents they can squeeze through surprisingly small spaces.



ERIC ISSELE/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM



own a pet chinchilla, D'Alonzo's organization has elected to walk a tricky fine line. She lets potential adopters know that they might have a difficult time fulfilling all the chinchillas' needs, and that the critters will likely kick up clouds of dust while bathing. "And if you want to get into all that, and you're determined that their needs outweigh your illusions of an attractive home, then that's a good home."

Born to Run

Couch potatoes looking for low-key, lazy companions should steer clear of chinchillas. "They are not cuddly lap pets. They are not gonna sit and watch *American Idol* with you," says Clowe. "Even the nicest chinchilla can be difficult to pick up. They'll tolerate being held briefly, but their preference is to run around, and they're highly athletic; they need a lot of exercise."

Susan Wong, a chinchilla owner and president of the Alexandria, Va.-based rescue group Friends of Rabbits, says her chinchillas will sit on her knees or shoulders, though

they don't really like to be held, scratched, or petted. "But they will come to me on their terms. Like if I'm sitting down, they will come to me and sit on me, but usually because I'm giving them a treat, too," she says. "So there's that exchange where they trust me because I'm the treat dispenser."

Chinchilla fur contains about 50 hairs per follicle, making it "extremely soft—like nothing I've ever felt before," says Shannon Gallo, an administrative associate for The HSUS and the owner of a one-eyed chinchilla named Mr. Peepers. That kind of softness can be cuddle-tempting, but Gallo knows better than to try to pet her chinchilla all over, as if he were a dog or a cat. "An actual full-on pet—he hates it," Gallo says.

Chinchillas "tend to be somewhat solitary," Wong says, noting that they are more like hamsters and less like more sociable rodents, such as rats. But some chinchillas get along well in pairs, especially if they've been spayed or neutered, which helps reduce their aggression and territorialism. Wong advises people who've decided to

adopt to get a pair if they can, and to get them fixed.

Despite some physical and biological similarities, chinchillas don't behave like guinea pigs. D'Alonzo notes that guinea pigs are much easier to catch and hold, while chinchillas have similar stubby legs but are much more nimble.

"Guinea pigs, they'll sit and hang out with you," adds Clowe. "You can read a book, or watch your TV programs, and hang out with your guinea pig. Not with a chinchilla, which is another reason why they're not always appropriate choices for younger people."

A big challenge for shelters is that many of the chinchillas they receive are under-socialized or nervous about being in a new environment, D'Alonzo says. Catching them is difficult, she adds, because grabbing them can cause "hair slip," which leaves the shelter worker with a chunk of hair and the chinchilla with a naked patch of skin. "Their hair pulls out fairly easily with very little pressure, so you don't want to stress them out," she says.

To avoid hair slip, *The Merck/Merial Manual for Pet Health* recommends that people speak softly and handle chinchillas gently. Tame, nonpregnant chinchillas may be picked up by grasping the base of the tail while supporting the body with the other hand, the book notes; pregnant female chinchillas should not be handled unless necessary.

What's Wit' Chew?

Anyone caring for a chinchilla—in a shelter or a home—needs to realize their love of exercise and their need to gnaw.

The animals need wire mesh cages, "as big as possible, because they're gonna be spending the next 15 years in it," Clowe says, alluding to the potential lifespan for a well-cared-for chinchilla. She recommends cages be at least 4 feet tall, 3 feet wide, and 2 feet deep, and equipped with ledges and platforms for hopping, rather than the tunnels, ladders, and ramps common in ferret cages. Another key component for the chinchilla cage is an exercise wheel or a flying saucer-style disc for running in place. (For additional details, see the sidebar on p. 28.)

Exercise outside the cage is also essential to chinchilla health: *The Merck/Merial*



JAMES HETTINGER/THE HSUS

Loose hay, places to hide, an exercise wheel, ledges and platforms, a water bottle, and a bowl of food pellets are among the elements of a well-equipped chinchilla cage—like this one housing chins awaiting adoption at the Animal Welfare League of Alexandria in Virginia.

Manual for Pet Health recommends two hours of supervised play daily. “Most people are in agreement that at least an hour daily is necessary, but more is preferred,” adds Sally Blacke, who with her husband, Adam, runs the website *chincare.com*.

“Some people use their bathrooms as a play area for chinchillas, but unless you have a gigantic bathroom, it just does not give them enough room to run,” Clowe says. Let loose in a room, chinchillas will memorize it and explore it in lightning fashion, she adds. “It’s like having a little skateboarder in your house, like little Tony Hawk. They’ll go bounce off the wall and jump up on stuff. They definitely need to be able to stretch their legs.”

Chinchilla owners need to make accommodations so their pets can exercise outside the cage every day without being able to reach things that shouldn’t be chewed, Clowe says. Playrooms should be “chinchilla-proofed” by removing or protecting chewing hazards such as electrical cords. “They think everything is edible ... and they can be destructive if they’re not supervised properly,” she says. “They’ll chew on papers and books and cords and furniture and baseboards and carpet.”

As for chinchilla-proofing a home, that can be a matter of perception; pet owners have differing levels of tolerance. “I have a space that’s chinchilla-proofed, if you might call it that, where they can’t get to my wires,” Wong says. “They do still chew on my wallboards, and they do still chew on my molding, and they chew on various things that are around their play area, but those I’ve kind of committed to the animals.”

D’Alonzo recalls matching her ingenuity against chinchillas’ determination to chew—and losing. She brought home four of her shelter’s chinchillas for an overnight stay to make it easier to take them to a veterinary appointment the next morning. The bathroom looked like the best place to keep them: It was all tile, except for the door frame and cabinet. To protect the vulnerable areas, she rigged up a plastic wall supported by nine full cans of paint that she used as weights.

Between 11:30 p.m. the first day and 6 a.m. the next, the chinchillas pushed the cans out of the way and chewed everything



Native to cold mountain regions in South America, chinchillas have long been exploited for their fur.

they could reach. The door trim disappeared as high as a chinchilla can stand, D’Alonzo says, and the cabinet was peppered with little chisel marks. All of this happened even though they had cardboard boxes to nibble on and other things to do. D’Alonzo acknowledges that she underestimated her visitors.

Chins up

Chinchillas aren’t as popular as rabbits or guinea pigs, Wong says, partly because they cost more. Pet stores generally charge \$100 to \$150 for a chinchilla, while rabbits or guinea pigs are sold for \$10 to \$25. The higher price might make customers think harder about their decision, and stores sometimes provide tip sheets for chinchilla care, but the pets still wind up at shelters and rescue groups.

At the AWLA, “the volume of chinchillas has skyrocketed” in the past two years, reports D’Alonzo. Until two years ago, she estimates, the shelter had gotten maybe one chinchilla in 15 years. In the past two years, it’s received about 25—a rise she attributes to major-chain pet stores in the region carrying chinchillas more frequently. So far, the shelter has not gotten any strays; all of its chinchillas have been surrendered as singles or in groups of two or three.

Clowe adds that Small Angels, in its first year of operation six years ago, took in four chinchillas—meeting all the surrender requests it received. Now, Clowe says, the

number of requests seems to double every year. The group, which gets nearly all of its animals from shelters, has about 30 foster homes for small pets awaiting adoption, but it struggles to find space for the number of chinchillas needing permanent homes.

Owners “get them, and they just don’t want to take care of them anymore. We’ve heard all kinds of reasons” for surrender, she says. Clowe recalls that one family moving a few states away figured it would be easier to just buy a new chinchilla after the move. Another family, heading for vacation, decided to surrender its chinchilla to a shelter rather than find a pet sitter.

Blacke says she and her husband, who do chinchilla rescue work, hear owners cite allergies and lifestyle changes (such as joining the military or relocating) as reasons for surrendering their pets, but most frequently they hear that people simply don’t have the time. “Because chins require supervised exercise time in a large, gnaw-proofed room for at least an hour daily, they’re a time-consuming pet for most people to maintain,” she says.

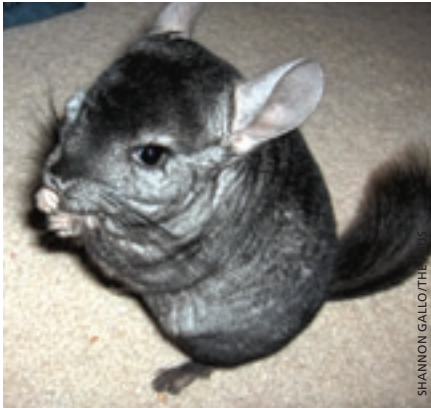
In chatting with people giving up their chinchillas, D’Alonzo often hears that the pets were “not quite what they had in mind”—all the more reason that any shelter placing these animals must make sure adopters have an accurate picture of what they’ll need to be happy and healthy.

Continues on page 29



Taking in a Chin

What are some of the other key points that caregivers and potential adopters need to know about chinchillas?



Mr. Peepers, a one-eyed chinchilla, is awfully pleasing to look at and tempting to touch, but owner Shannon Gallo knows better than to go overboard in petting him.

They're a long-term commitment.

With plenty of exercise and proper nutrition, they can live for as long as 20 years. "People aren't always interested in making that long of a commitment," says Michelle Clowe, chinchilla coordinator for Small Angels Rescue. When parents consider getting chinchillas for their children, she asks, "Well, do you realize the chinchillas are still gonna be there when your children are leaving for college?"

But chinchillas' longevity can also be part of their appeal. "For some people, the 15- to 20-year commitment is a huge bonus," Clowe says. "They want their animal friends to be with them for a long time."

They don't like it hot. Chinchillas have more hair per square inch than any other land mammal, Clowe notes. The millions of fine hairs that make their fur so soft (and, sadly, so appealing to the fur trade) also serve to keep the heat in, she explains. Air conditioning is a must, because chinchillas will start to feel uncomfortable at around 75 degrees, and when the thermometer hits 80 they're in danger of heat stroke.

They dig the dust. In their natural habitat, chinchillas keep clean by rolling in fine volcanic ash. Pet chinchillas get the same result by frolicking in containers of commercial chinchilla dust, which sticks to the oils and dirt in their coats, then falls off, helping to remove the grunge. Cleaning their "exceptionally dense" fur helps prevent matting and overheating, and is also "a vital psychological pacifier for chins, who are very clean animals," notes Sally Blacke, the co-webmaster for chincare.com.

Baths should be offered for about 10 minutes daily in dust that's 2 to 4 inches deep, according to *The Merck/Merial Manual for Pet Health*. Owners who can't meet the daily schedule should aim for offering baths at least every other day, Blacke says.

Dust from chinchilla baths and dust/mold from hay are two big sources of allergy problems for owners, notes Lani Ritchey, president and founder of the California Chinchilla Association and California Chinchilla Rescue. Ritchey runs a HEPA air filter in her chinchilla room to catch dust and fur. To further control the spread of dust, people can limit the baths to five to 10 minutes, and use a closed container—essentially a covered tray with a hole in the side—rather than an open pan.

Several sources recommended against using scented chinchilla dust; Clowe notes that the animals don't want to smell like lavender or cucumbers.

They need big cages. "I always tell people, 'There's no such thing as a habitat that's too big,'" Clowe says. A big cage is important, she explains, because even if chinchillas are let out for two hours a day—which would be "phenomenal"—they're still confined for the other 22 hours.

Chinchillas should never stand on wire, Clowe says, noting that wire bottoms are "incredibly painful" and can eventually cause wounds, sores, foot deformities, and arthritis. If a cage does

have a wire floor or level, she suggests modifying it with a ceramic tile or piece of wood to provide a solid surface.

They also "seem to prefer having a place to hide within their cage," notes *The Merck/Merial Manual for Pet Health*. Chinchilla owner Susan Wong says her pets like hiding in hay or "hide-y toys" such as tunnels, boxes, and huts.

(Small Angels recommends the chinchilla mansions available at qualitycage.com.)

They gotta move. Another key component for the chinchilla cage is an exercise wheel or a flying saucer-style disc for running in place. Wheels should be solid metal and at least 15 inches in diameter, Clowe says; chinchillas will chew plastic wheels and possibly injure their paws or legs if the running surface consists of little bars. (Plastic igloos or shelving, which chinchillas will chew and ingest, should also be avoided.) She cautions that you likely won't find an adequate chinchilla exercise wheel or flying saucer in a pet store; it's best to look online.

And those exercise balls that animals can climb inside? Clowe calls them "horrible" for chinchillas. The balls have tiny air slits, which can trap a chinchilla's toes or cause him to quickly become overheated. Chinchillas hop rather than walking like hamsters or rats, so their physiology doesn't equip them to be inside a sphere, she adds. Chinchillas may also relieve themselves while they're running inside the ball, which Clowe describes as "not pleasant for anyone." Their poor eyesight causes chinchillas to bump the balls into walls and furniture, which is "incredibly stressful. It's like having a little car accident," she says. "... People should trash the balls, and save their money and put it toward a good exercise wheel."

For an extensive compendium of chinchilla care information, visit chincare.com.

Homeward Bound

Are chinchillas that difficult to manage? The experts interviewed for this story all declined to categorize chinchillas as “high-maintenance” pets, but agreed that proper care depends on owners becoming educated.

“Buying the right kind of pellet isn’t difficult once you know which ones to buy,” says Clowe, and the same goes for chinchillas’ other needs. “... I don’t want to say [they’re] high maintenance, but I don’t want to say they’re easy. They do take attention.”

A plain, hay-based pellet is the cornerstone of a good chinchilla diet, Clowe says. She recommends against fancier foods with corn, seeds, or nuts mixed in—which look like fun but are actually harmful. Chinchillas also require fresh, loose hay because they “need to have things moving through their system all the time,” she says. Treats such as berries or dried fruit should be given very sparingly, she adds.

Because chinchillas are rodents, their teeth continuously grow, which means they need things like hay and chew toys to gnaw on in order to keep their teeth ground down, Wong notes. Their nails are difficult to trim, and the procedure should always be done by a veterinarian, she adds. Providing surfaces that wear down the nails can reduce the frequency of trimming.

Chinchillas are both smart and nocturnal. Chew toys and an exercise wheel help alleviate boredom, Blacke notes, but she and her husband strongly recommend giving them a TV to watch when they aren’t out for exercise or interaction. This keeps the chinchillas engaged “when the rest of the household has gone to bed, and they’re still going strong on their nocturnal schedule.”

When the AWLA gets a chinchilla, “We cringe, and [then] we think, ‘Oh, we can do this!’ It’s sort of one of those things where you buck up,” D’Alonzo says with a laugh.

In a shelter, caring for a chinchilla is relatively easy, D’Alonzo says: The floors have drains, enabling shelter staff to sweep and hose. In a residential home, cleanup can be trickier; when chinchillas run and jump, they often push the bedding out of the bottom of their cages, and owners can become frustrated with the seemingly constant maintenance. D’Alonzo sees chinchillas facing the same image problem that plagued rabbits in past decades. Twenty years ago, she says, people didn’t real-



BRYCE DAWLEY/ANIMAL WELFARE LEAGUE OF ALEXANDRIA

With chinchillas available from pet stores and websites, some shelters and rescue groups are reporting greater numbers being surrendered, with reasons ranging from allergies to a lack of time to provide proper care. This chinchilla was awaiting adoption at the Animal Welfare League of Alexandria in Virginia.

ize that spaying or neutering a rabbit made litter box training almost instantaneous. Today, chinchillas are on a similar cusp where owners are starting to understand that care doesn’t have to be so difficult. The dust that chinchillas bathe in can create a mess if it’s in an open container, she explains, but people are realizing that they can get a closed container. “It’s still messy, but that closed container means less cleanup for people, means better returns for the owner, in their opinion, and it may mean that [the animal stays] in the home.”

Wong says she’s hesitant to recommend chinchillas as pets, recognizing that many people fail to grasp the realities of ownership. “Overall, as a general observation of our population, most people don’t like things being chewed up, most people don’t like dust, and most people don’t have the time or interest in exercising an animal that doesn’t want to interact with them intensely,” she says.

D’Alonzo says she too tries to make sure potential adopters know what they’re getting into. “Unfortunately, we wind up talking most people out of them, just by being honest,” she says. “Or that might be fortunate!”

But those willing to learn the risks and rewards of chinchilla ownership might find an entertaining companion.

Chinchillas have semi-opposable thumbs, D’Alonzo notes, and watching them pick up things to eat is “highly endearing.”

Like many rodents, she notes, they can flatten out and squeeze through most any opening that’s as big as their head. With all that fur, they appear to be larger than the areas through which they can fit—prompting some jaw-dropping sights. D’Alonzo recalls watching one ooze undamaged underneath a closet door: “It was a fantasy cartoon. It was amazing to watch.”

Wong finds her chinchillas “really delightful to watch,” and she’s learned to accept that they’ll never act like her best buddies. She says her interactions with them are still rewarding: They’ll stand on their hind legs to ask for a treat, and they’re smart enough to distinguish her from a stranger.

“If you have the right expectations, they’re great. They are funny—they will make you laugh. ... They’re little mischief-makers,” agrees Clowe. “... You absolutely can develop a relationship with them, but it’s a particular type of relationship. It’s gonna be different than the type of relationship you may have with a dog or a cat or a rat or another companion animal.” AS