

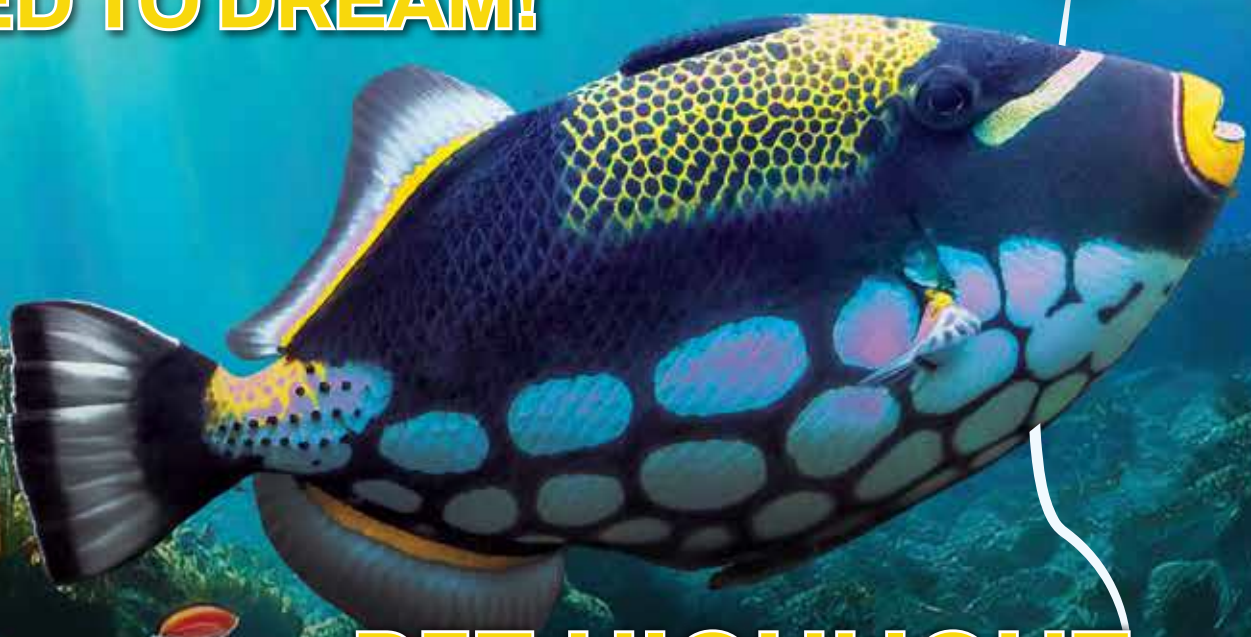
NATIPETS

SUMMER/FALL 2025 | ISSUE 6

AQUARIUM FUN

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**PET HIGHLIGHT:
ROMEO GOES HOME**

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PUBLISHER'S VIEW OUR AFFECTION FOR OUR PETS

Psychologists explain our affection for our pets in terms of several different possible contributing factors. First, humans have been breeding the species that we adopt as pets most frequently to have the physical characteristics that appeal to us, such as large eyes in relation to the head, in particular. All dogs are members of the same species (Canis familiaris), whether the short,

squished noses of brachycephalic canine species like those of the Pug and Bulldogs, the floppy ears of the Labradors and Retrievers, or the skin folds of the Shar Pei, those characteristics were all products of artificial selection by human beings. They appeal to us the way they do simply because we bred them in the first place as much for those physical features that we consider so "cute" as for their other breed-specific characteristics and capabilities. The fact that we typically "infantilize" our pets (meaning that we treat them like infants throughout their entire lives) may have a lot to do with the emotions they evoke in us in conjunction with way the physical characteristics that we have bred into them appeal to our subconscious nurturing instincts.

This concept of validation is extremely significant throughout the field of human psychology. Essentially, it means that we derive psychological comfort and satisfaction from being perceived positively by others, and especially, from being perceived the way we perceive ourselves. In human relationships, even the deepest love is "conditional" and with the possible exception of parental love for children, the love we may have for others today can change or even disappear altogether based on the choices, values, and beliefs of people we love, tomorrow. Meanwhile, the love that our pets (particularly our dogs and pet birds) have for us is virtually "unconditional." Whereas we might sometimes lose the respect and love of other people because of things that we do or because of things they may find out they do not like about us, once we have an established bond with our pets, they continue to love us regardless of any personal flaws that might cause other people to stop loving us. With so much uncertainty in the world today, we can be certain, that no matter what, no matter how bad our day has been, how frustrated life can be at times, when we walk in that door, our dog is going to lick us and celebrate you. That is a special bond, that we have for our pets, and that pets have for us – until next time.

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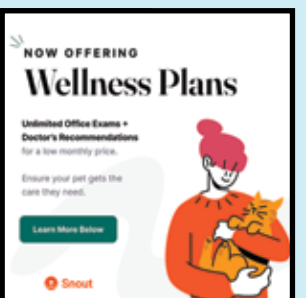
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EXPLORING THE BIOCHEMICAL CORNERS OF AQUARIUMS: SYSTEMS, CYCLES AND SNAILS!

By Kira Tackett

As a biologist and aquarist, I've had the pleasure of maintaining freshwater tanks teeming with mystery snails, shrimp, small fish, and even Triops. These experiences have deepened my appreciation for the delicate balance required to sustain aquatic life. In doing so, I have been acquainted with direct foils to common misinformation spread throughout the pet industry. Most of which stem from the purpose of profit. It was not uncommon for companies to implant the idea that aquarium pets require little care, when in fact this is usually the opposite. While they may not vocalize

One of the most critical elements in any aquatic setup is understanding and maintaining the nitrogen cycle. In every aquarium, waste products from food, plant matter, and animals break down into ammonia (NH_3), a toxic compound in even trace amounts.

- In an established tank, beneficial bacteria (such as *Nitrosomonas* and *Nitrobacter*) convert ammonia to nitrite (NO_2^-), and then to nitrate (NO_3^-), which is far less toxic but still harmful in high concentrations.

- In my freshwater tanks, I aimed to keep nitrate levels below 20 parts per million (ppm), usually by incorporating fast-growing plants like hornwort or duckweed, which act as natural nitrate sinks, and by performing weekly water changes of 25 - 30%.

pH, another vital parameter, determines the availability of nutrients and the health of both flora and fauna. My freshwater aquariums generally sat between pH 6.5 and 7.2, which suited most soft-water species. I learned early on that even the type of substrate mattered. Driftwood could lower pH naturally by leaching tannins, while crushed coral could raise it. Stability, more than exact numbers, was the goal.

Snails became some of my favorite tank residents not only for their charm but for their utility.

- Mystery snails (*Pomacea bridgesii*), in particular, are peaceful scavengers and excellent at managing algae and detritus. However, they can reproduce rapidly under ideal conditions.

- If overpopulation is a concern, Nerite snails (*Vitta zebra*) offer a more

controlled alternative. Unlike mystery snails, Nerites cannot reproduce in freshwater; they require brackish water to complete their life cycle. This makes them ideal for algae control without the risk of a tank overrun by baby snails. Their appetite for diatoms and green algae makes them especially helpful in newly cycled tanks.

Furthermore, for newcomers to aquatics, I always recommend starting with hardy species that tolerate a range of water conditions.

- Neon tetras, zebra danios, and harlequin rasboras are vibrant, peaceful, and adaptable.

- Corydoras catfish are gentle bottom-dwellers that help clean leftover food and prefer to be kept in small groups.

- Betta fish, while more solitary, are another resilient choice if kept in a properly heated and filtered setup.

- When it comes to plants, Java fern, Anubias, and Amazon sword are forgiving and don't demand high lighting or added CO_2 . Java moss is a personal favorite: its tangled green threads create natural hiding spaces for shrimp and fry. These plants not only beautify the tank but actively contribute to nitrate reduction and oxygenation.

Saltwater aquariums, while alluring, introduce a greater level of complexity. In contrast to the forgiving nature of many freshwater species, marine organisms are sensitive to even small fluctuations in water chemistry.

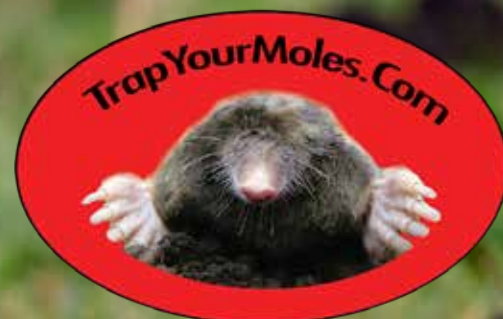
- Salinity must be monitored closely, typically with a hydrometer or refractometer, and maintained between specific gravity 1.023 - 1.026.

- The nitrogen cycle still applies but is monitored even more meticulously due to the increased sensitivity of coral and marine invertebrates to nitrites and nitrates.

Saltwater setups also involve managing other variables: calcium, alkalinity, and magnesium levels for coral health; the use of protein skimmers; and often the addition of live rock, which houses denitrifying bacteria. Unlike my freshwater setups, which were simple and plant-filled, saltwater tanks felt more like running a laboratory in that they are rewarding, but certainly not for the unprepared. In all cases, aquariums require a delicate harmony between biology and chemistry. My experiences have taught me that thriving tanks are not made with gadgets alone, but with an observant eye, a scientist's patience, and a caregiver's heart. Whether it's the gentle bubble trail of a snail or the sudden flicker of a shrimp darting behind a plant, aquariums offer a microcosm of life's quiet persistence: a micro ecosystem always in motion, always teaching.



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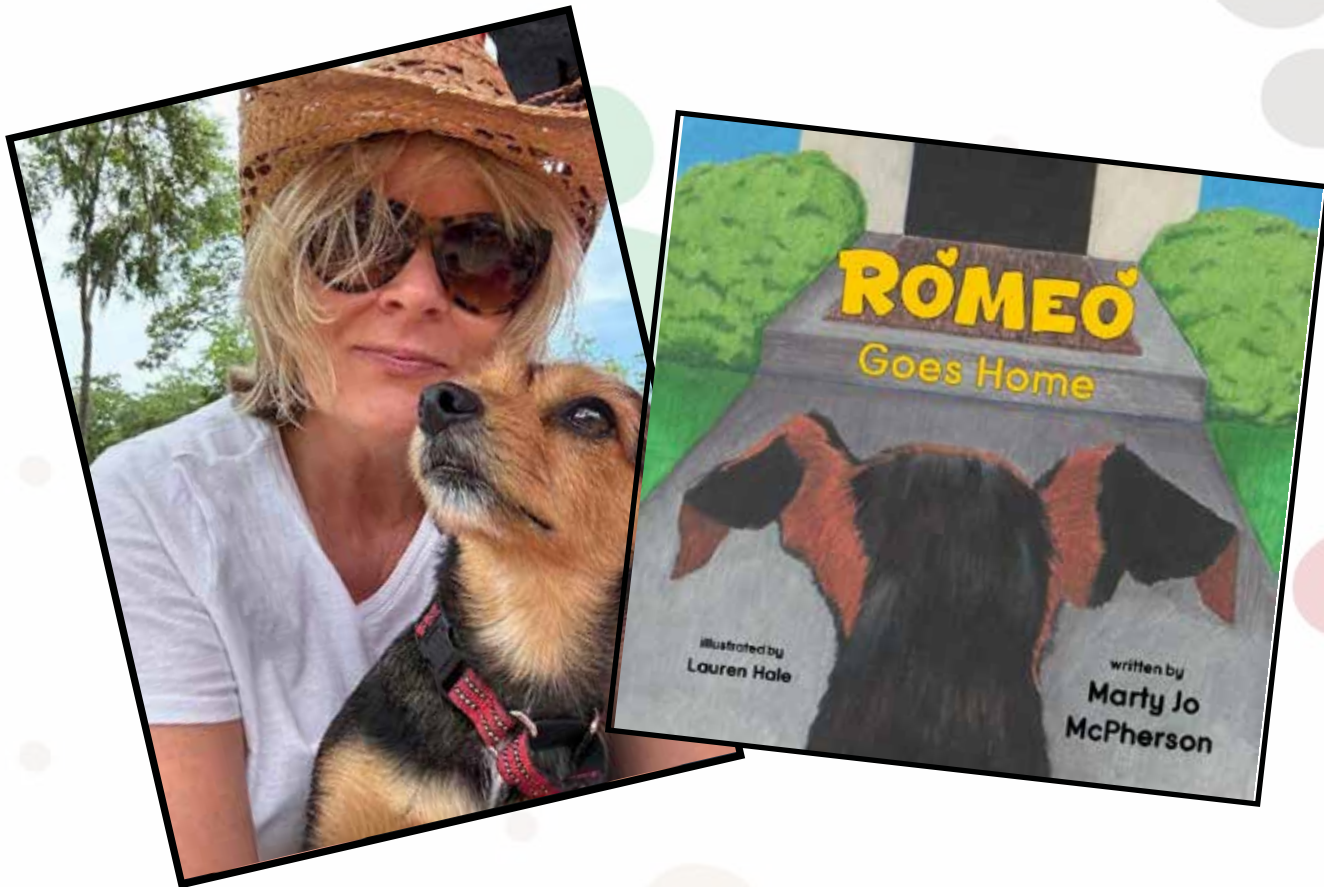
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LOCAL SPOTLIGHT

LOCAL AUTHOR MARTY MCPHERSON RELEASES ROMEO GOES HOME

BY SHARON BOYLES

Everyone loves a great story with a happy ending, and local author Marty McPherson's new children's book, *Romeo Goes Home*, offers a heartwarming true story that is sure to leave readers of all ages with a smile.

The star of the book is her dog, Romeo, a Yorkie-Beagle-Maltese mix, who went home with Marty when he was just six months old. At the time, Marty was looking to adopt a larger, senior dog, but as fate would have it, a wiggly little puppy came into her life instead. "When I went to the shelter, there was a cute little puppy staring at me through the window of the puppy room," she recalls. "He was the only one in the room not barking. I held him for an hour... and then took him home."

Romeo is now six years old and has the starring role not only in *Romeo Goes Home* but also in several other Romeo books, which are yet to

be published. The books highlight Marty and Romeo's adventures together and include: *Romeo Goes to the Beach* (about their life in Hilton Head), *Romeo Goes to Work* (about Marty's work in an island general store), *Romeo Goes to Kentucky* (about their move to Northern Kentucky), *Romeo Goes to the Farm* (about experiences on her boyfriend's farm), and *Romeo Goes to a Sleepover* (after a stay with his second family, Norma and Phil Rolf). "We've had lots of adventures, and I have more books in mind," Marty says.

Marty's inspiration for writing the Romeo books originally came from reading to her boyfriend's grandchildren at night. She thought it would be fun to read them a story about a dog they know, and she was also secretly wishing for shorter tales to read! The books are also inspired by Marty's wish to be a volunteer reader at the library and take Romeo along, so

the kids can meet the real-life star of a book. She hopes that she'll be able to do this if Romeo is certified by Pet Partners.

The first people to hear the story were the residents of Celebration Villa of Summit Hills, a senior living facility. "We were actually visiting the residents there before the book came out," Marty says. "So, they were the first to hear it." Residents were also given copies of the book and got to spend time with the celebrity pup. "They loved Romeo, and Romeo loved them," Marty recalls. "He's really good with the seniors...it's rewarding when a resident thanks us for bringing him and tells me that he made their day."

One of Marty's biggest challenges with *Romeo Goes Home* was finding the right illustrator, but she eventually connected with Lauren Hale through a mutual friend. Lauren is a talented artist and art teacher who is in her twelfth year of teaching at Summit View Academy. Illustrating a book is a dream come true for her, and when she met Marty, they immediately clicked. "I loved Marty's ideas and motives behind *Romeo Goes Home*," she says. "I felt an instant connection to her when we first met at Starbucks to show her my sketchbooks. She has a genuine kindness about her and lights up the room when she (and Romeo) walk in. I loved that she took her dog everywhere with her and that she had this plan to share Romeo's love with everyone, including me."

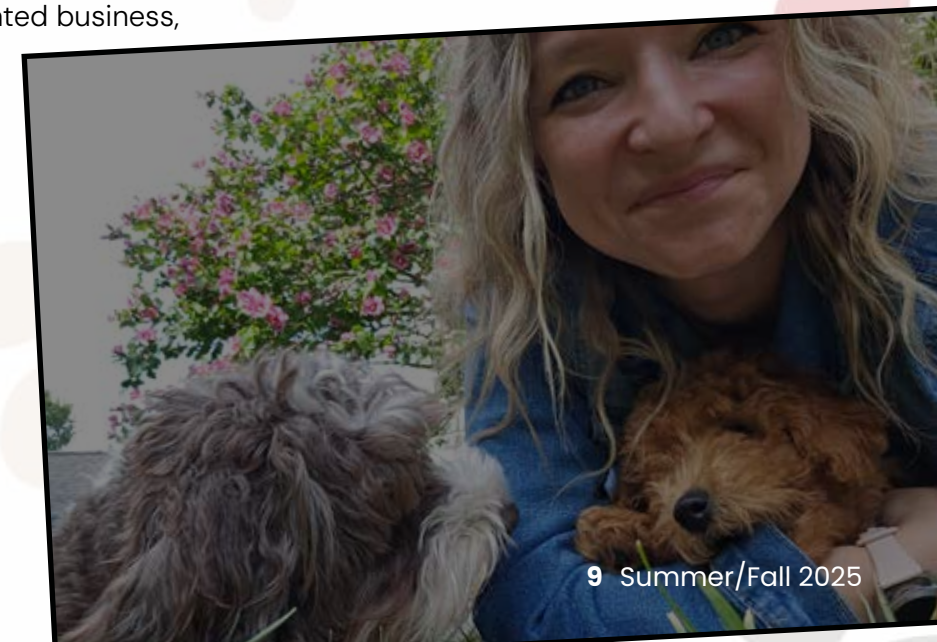
Lauren adds that this opportunity really helped her to grow as a person and as an artist. "I don't think I have ever felt as surreal as when I saw my illustrations in an actual book in my hands," she recalls. "Seeing the book online for sale was so cool, too! I remember taking a screenshot on my phone and sending it to my family group text to share my excitement!"

She was also excited to share *Romeo Goes Home* with her students and school community. "I was able to show my students that teachers are multi-faceted, that art will take them many different places, and that art matters and communicates when words cannot. Art is life-saving, no matter what form it comes in. Marty made me feel like my art mattered and gave me a chance to push myself outside of my comfort zone to try something new. I hope to continue making art in many forms and would love to continue illustrating children's books!"

To purchase your copy of *Romeo Goes Home*, you can either visit Amazon or buy directly from Marty by emailing her at martyjo290@gmail.com. The book is also in circulation at the Covington branch library. Marty is available for book signings and story times for kids ages 1-8. If you would like to reach out to Lauren about an art or illustration project, she can be reached at nelson43221@gmail.com.

Interested in seeing your local pet-related business, event, or project featured in *Natipets*?

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You Got to Move It, Move It

By Talandor Elias



Movement and exercise are critical to the health and well-being of any pet, regardless of species or age. Just like humans, when pets don't get enough exercise, they can experience weight gain, anxiety, boredom, depression, and health issues related to sedentary living.

Dogs, with their love of outdoor activities and abundance of energy are most in need of a consistent exercise plan. Many people simply take their pup(s) for a stroll, and that checks all the boxes, but if a walk isn't possible, there are plenty of other activities to keep your dog fit and healthy. You can try tug of war (keep it short, to preserve your pup's teeth and your arm), indoor/outdoor fetch, puzzles and games, hide and seek, or obedience drills. Any of these will give your dog the chance to get moving and stimulate mental interest, which will help prevent undesirable activities like shredding the sofa or barking at anything that moves.



Cats need mental stimulation, too, to help prevent behavioral and emotional issues. Although they spend much of their day sleeping, exercise can help them stay healthy physically and mentally. Cat toys and feather sticks abound at most pet stores, or you can make your own! Cats are most active at dawn and dusk, so these are ideal times to initiate playtime. If your cat isn't interested in playing, for whatever reason, don't push, because they'll likely be more interested at a later time. If your cat is up for a romp, it's best to keep playtime to 10-15 minutes to prevent boredom or overstimulation, and don't use your hands as toys because your cat (and their claws) will almost always be faster than you are. Some cats enjoy going outdoors for walks, so if

your cat is one of these rare felines, be sure to use a harness and leash designed for walking a cat and make sure your cat is microchipped and up to date on all vaccinations and flea and tick preventative.

If you have an exotic pet, figuring out how to exercise them might be a little more challenging. But many of these friends still need regular exercise to remain fit and fabulous. Ferrets and chinchillas enjoy running, climbing, and playing, so with a little imagination, you can set up obstacle courses and agility runs. If your companion is of the feathered sort, flight training and treat foraging can be good options to help them stretch their wings and their minds. Small animals should have a run wheel or a multi-leveled habitat with stairs to scamper up and down.

Rabbits can (and should) be let out of their habitat daily to run around, explore, forage for treats, and have some social interaction time with their humans. Other exotics, such as reptiles, might enjoy an obstacle course or a game of lizard laser tag. You can even exercise betta fish by letting them follow your finger along the side of the tank or installing a betta hoop that they can swim through and maybe get a treat on the other side.

Your pet's health is just as important as your own, and they're depending on you, so be sure you're including proper exercise as part of their daily care.

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Species Spotlight: THE HELLBENDER

By Kira Tackett



Among the cold, clear waterways of the Appalachian Mountains, the Ozarks, and the rolling Allegheny Plateau, an ancient amphibian older than the hills still clings to its birthright. The Eastern Hellbender (*Cryptobranchus alleganiensis alleganiensis*), North America’s largest salamander, has endured for millions of years. Yet today, its numbers are dwindling, and its story is one that demands both reverence and urgent action.

Hellbenders belong to the family Cryptobranchidae, a group whose evolutionary roots stretch back over 160 million years to the time of the dinosaurs. Massive, fully aquatic salamanders whose basic body plan has hardly changed. Once common across the eastern United States, their modern range has contracted, and they are now found only in select stretches of unpolluted rivers and streams. For centuries, they were known by many colorful names: snot otters, lasagna lizards, and devil dogs. Monikers born of their peculiar, rippling skin and cryptic habits, it is no wonder how they’ve captured such awe over time.

- A mature Hellbender can grow to lengths of 16–29 inches (40–74 cm) and weigh up to 5 pounds (2.3 kg).
- Their flattened bodies and broad, paddle-like tails are perfect for navigating swift currents, allowing them to wedge themselves under rocks to avoid

- predators and ambush prey.
- The most striking feature is their excess skin: flaps and folds along the sides of their body that greatly increase surface area.
 - This adaptation is essential because, despite having lungs, Hellbenders rely primarily on cutaneous respiration (absorbing oxygen directly through their skin, also known as semi-permeable).

- This makes them exceptionally sensitive to water quality. Even subtle changes in oxygen levels, temperature, or sedimentation can be fatal.
- Small, lidless eyes are poorly suited to detail, but in the dim underwater world, vision matters less than vibration and scent.
- A lateral line system, much like that in fish, detects minute changes in water movement, allowing them to sense prey such as crayfish, insects, and small fish in almost-near darkness.

Hellbenders live a slow, secretive life. They are capable of living for 25–30 years in the wild, even longer within captivity. Mating occurs in late summer or early autumn, when males excavate depressions under large flat rocks to create nesting chambers. Females deposit

between 150 and 500 eggs, which males then guard with surprising devotion for up to two months, fanning fresh water over them until they hatch. The hatchlings, called larvae, possess external gills, which they lose as they mature.

This extended parental care is rare among amphibians and reflects the Hellbender’s reliance on very specific, stable habitats for reproductive success.

Sadly, the Hellbender’s very adaptations make it extraordinarily vulnerable to human activity. Pollution, sedimentation from agriculture and development, damming, and the removal of streamside forests have degraded much of its habitat. Excess sediment fills the spaces under rocks, smothering eggs and depriving adults of shelter. Declining water quality impacts their oxygen absorption, while introduced predators and diseases, such as chytrid fungus, further imperil populations. In many states, Hellbenders are now considered threatened or endangered.

Hellbenders are bioindicators. In essence, living meters of freshwater health. If Hellbenders thrive, the ecosystem is clean, oxygen-rich, and biologically balanced. If they disappear, it is a warning flare that the river itself is in trouble, with

consequences cascading through fish, insects, birds, and even human communities who depend on the same waters.

Across their range, biologists, conservation groups, and local communities are working to safeguard the Hellbender’s future. Efforts include habitat restoration, captive breeding and reintroduction programs, and public outreach to reduce pollution and disturbance. In some regions, artificial nesting structures are being installed to give the salamanders secure breeding sites.

Protecting Hellbenders is less about saving a single species and more about preserving the integrity of entire river systems. Each rescued Hellbender represents a victory for biodiversity, for clean water, and for the living legacy of our planet’s wild heritage. A final word as a conservationist, I can say that meeting a Hellbender in the wild is akin to shaking hands with deep time. Its ancient eyes seem to hold the memory of unspoiled rivers, of forests undisturbed, of a world where water ran clear from its source to the sea. If we wish to see these ancient amphibians endure another hundred million years, we must act now. To protect the rivers, to protect the forests, and in doing so, protect the Hellbender’s place in the current of life.



From the Sea and Snipped into our Hearts: Howie the Crab

By: Kira Tackett

Who Was Howie?

Oh, to be a rainbow crab (*Cardisoma armatum*), beloved social media figure whose unique talents such as wearing hats, enjoying caviar, and communicating through sign-like gestures charmed millions online. Howie first went viral in February 2022 after a video of her enjoying a shell-cleaning routine on TikTok captured thousands of hearts within her blue claws. Over time, Howie amassed nearly 2 million followers and remained both an emotional and educational presence online.

Many viewers were initially skeptical or even critical, wondering if Howie deserved such attention, but her behavior prompted a wave of empathy and curiosity about crab sentience. Howie's owner, Laura Porter, became a vocal advocate for recognizing crustaceans' capacity for feeling, particularly highlighting that crabs do feel pain and temperature, even across their entire exoskeleton. Effectively debunking myths that crustaceans are numb or less sentient compared to vertebrate organisms. With myths, you must find the roots, which lie in individual perception. Grabbing hold of these attentions, she inspired conversations about crustacean welfare, pushing more people to reconsider common practices like boiling alive and to explore humane alternatives, which in turn shifted the policy and public science towards crustacean welfare. A landmark 2021 London School of Economics review concluded that decapod crustaceans (including true crabs) meet multiple criteria for sentience and recommended they be recognized in UK animal welfare law, an analysis later reflected in UK legislative frameworks and corporate practice updates.

In parallel, several jurisdictions and retailers have tightened standards. Switzerland, for example,

banned boiling lobsters alive without stunning in 2018; UK grocers have moved toward electrical stunning and away from practices like eyestalk ablation in prawns. These steps are grounded in a precautionary, evidence-based approach to welfare. Behavioral work shows crabs make trade-offs consistent with more than reflexive nociception: hermit crabs will abandon valuable shells to avoid electric shocks, and shore crabs balance shock avoidance against predator risk, suggesting central processing of aversive states. This doesn't "prove" pain in a human sense, but the convergence of evidence meets modern thresholds for precautionary welfare.



After Howie passed away peacefully on February 18, 2025, Porter reiterated her plea: "Never boil crabs or any animal alive." Whereas rainbow crabs often live just 2-5 years in the wild or captivity, Howie lived to age 9. Molting becomes increasingly risky with age; her final years were marked by careful monitoring and emotional "moult-watch" updates. With a lifespan stretching far longer than species average, this reinforced the urgency of treating such creatures humanely. She was capable of communication never displayed before among crustaceans, learning to "ask" for food by mimicking her owner's gestures as a form of learned behavior reinforced over years of loving interaction.

Many might scoff at these concepts. But in her own way, Howie mattered. By living publicly through multiple late-life molts, this lively little crab turned a private biological drama into a shared lesson about risk, care, and respect. She nudged millions from "that's cute" toward "that's complex" and helped translate a modern consensus on crustacean welfare into everyday compassion. Giving us viral culture changes, one molt at a time.



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The Spiders that Dared to Dream!

by Kira Tackett

No larger than a fingernail, yet in those little bodies rests a mind as surprising as it is(also surprisingly) sophisticated. Jumping spiders (the group of spiders of the family Salticidae) have long been admired for their iridescent sheen and their cat-like pounce. Furthermore, recent science has begun to reveal something even more astonishing: these creatures may be not only intelligent, of thinking and planning but also...dreamers, in the truest sense of the word.

To appreciate their genius, you must first imagine the scale. A jumping spider's brain could fit comfortably within the period at the end of this sentence. Yet, somehow, this microscopic organ supports problem-solving, memory, and decision-making skills that rival some small mammals. In laboratory tests, jumping spiders have been shown to plan routes around obstacles, which is a feat requiring the mental equivalent of a blueprint. They can choose a detour that takes them out of sight of their prey, only to re-emerge at the perfect angle for a strike. This displays not merely instinct, but foresight as well seen only before among vertebrate apex predators.

The secret lies partly in their extraordinary vision:

- Jumping spiders have four pairs of eyes, each with a different function.
- The principal eyes (the large, forward-facing pair) provide high-resolution color vision and precise depth perception.
- The secondary eyes (arranged around the head) detect motion and give a wide-angle view, alerting the spider to movement in its periphery.
- This division of labor allows the spider to first detect prey with motion-sensitive secondary eyes, then lock on with the detail-rich principal eyes, reacting and assessing accordingly.
- Their retinal structure, consisting of moveable "tubes" with layered photoreceptor fields, allows them to scan and track a moving target without physically turning the head.

- Depth perception in jumping spiders is unusual: rather than using two eyes for stereoscopic vision like humans, each principal eye uses image defocus to gauge distance.

- They have multiple retinal layers, each focused at a slightly different depth. By comparing the degree of blur between these layers, the spider's brain calculates exact range to the target.

- Once a target is locked, the spider's brain predicts where it will be, not just where it is currently. The visual processing centers integrate speed, direction, and distance of the prey into a mental map. (This is a form of predictive modeling.)

- Laboratory experiments have shown they can memorize the location of the prey during the detour, suggesting they hold a working spatial map in memory while moving.

In short, it is a process not unlike a guided missile system. These are the quiet calculations of a creature who plays life's game in three dimensions, not just for hunting but for mating as well. A female may watch a rival male's courtship display and then subtly adjust her own position to send a signal of disinterest, or perhaps feign it until the moment she deems advantageous. Communication is important for both parties, lest the male be eaten...

Recent high-speed infrared footage of *Evarcha arcuata* spiderlings has revealed something astonishing: during rest, their legs twitch, their abdomens quiver, and their eye tubes dart beneath their translucent exoskeletons. This is eerily similar to the rapid eye movement

(REM) phase in humans (the stage most associated with vivid dreams.) Why would a spider dream? In humans and other animals, dreaming is often linked to memory consolidation, which is the process of sorting the day's experiences into useful knowledge. For a predator whose survival depends on precision timing, retaining the details of terrain, prey movement, and successful leaps could mean the difference between hunger and a full belly. A spider that dreams well might hunt well.

It also hints at something more profound: inner experience. Intelligence is not just the ability to act in the moment, but to imagine what could be. While we cannot yet know the narrative content of a spider's slumber, the signs suggest that their brains replay or rehearse experiences much like our own.

It is easy to dismiss small lives as simple ones. Yet here, in the palm-sized shadow of a morning leaf, is a creature who watches, plans, leaps with intent, and perhaps drifts through a tapestry of dreamscapes when night falls. So next time you see a jumping spider pause, its large eyes fixed upon you, consider that you are looking into the gaze of an animal who might remember this meeting. And later, in the warm dark of its hidden retreat, dream of it.



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OF YAMA AND HOOVES: GOAT YOGA

By Kira Tackett



In the lush, rolling outskirts of Cincinnati, Ohio, there is a place where the scent of hay intermingles with lavender soap, where laughter rises, followed by the gentle patter of tiny hooves which may interrupt even your most focused Warrior Pose. This is what has been coined as: goat yoga! It may sound odd (and it is, perhaps), but it is also a delightfully improbable fusion of ancient mindfulness practice and pastoral barnyard charm...and it has become a cherished local ritual.

Yoga's roots stretch deep into the soil of ancient India, cultivated over thousands of years as a discipline of mind, body, and spirit. It traveled across continents, settling into urban studios and suburban community centers, adapting to modern lifestyles. The "goat" part of goat yoga, however...is far newer, springing up in Oregon in 2016 when a farmer noticed her goats joyfully mingling with visiting yoga students. The novelty was irresistible: people found themselves grinning through their poses, their hearts lighter, their muscles looser. It did not take long for the two dots to be connected.

In Cincinnati specifically, this idea took root not as a passing fad, but as an expression of the region's deep love for both wellness and animals. Farmers saw an opportunity to bring their goats into closer contact with the public, while yoga instructors saw a most visionary way to break down the intimidating walls that can surround a new fitness practice: cute, charismatic farm animals! If you're curious about where to experience goat yoga around Cincinnati, here are some delightful options, each with its own special charm:

- Honey Sweet Acres

- Civic Garden Center of Cincinnati (hosted event held on-site, 2715 Reading Road)

An honorable mention is Good Green Earth Farm, which is sadly now closed, but the joy they have brought will always

be remembered: my mother has adopted some of their goats so the joy has been passed down!

For it is rather difficult to worry about whether your Triangle Pose is perfectly aligned when a kid goat is nibbling your shoelace or gently hopping onto your back. Stress melts under the warmth of animal presence; self-consciousness dissolves in the shared laughter of classmates. Psychologists point out that animal-assisted activities can reduce cortisol levels and increase oxytocin: the so-called "bonding hormone." Add in the mindful breathing and stretching of yoga, and you have a potent recipe for mental and emotional well-being. In Cincinnati, many participants say goat yoga offers an antidote to the digital, disconnected rush of modern life.

Here, a phone is forgotten at the bottom of a bag; the world narrows to the warmth of sun on your skin, the sound of hooves, the rhythm of your breath.

Goats are curious and social by nature. Young goats, especially, thrive on new experiences and contact, bounding among mats as though they are playgrounds made just for them. Being handled gently by strangers helps them become more confident and less skittish, which benefits their long-term care. Some Cincinnati farms note that their yoga goats are friendlier, healthier, and overall more adaptable due to these sessions.

Importantly, goat yoga classes are designed with the animals' comfort in mind. Sessions are typically held in familiar barns or grassy enclosures. Goats have access to food, water, shade, and rest spaces. When they've had enough human attention, they wander off, no explanation required. It is a freedom that ensures their well-being remains central. The goats remind us to take ourselves less seriously, to embrace playfulness even in the midst of discipline. They are living metaphors for yoga's deeper aim: connection. Connection to our breath, our bodies, each other, and to the more-than-human world that sustains us.

PET INSURANCE: PEACE OF MIND OR PIECE OF WORK?

By Sharon Boyles

Anyone who is a pet parent knows that there's almost always an "uh-oh" moment somewhere along the way. It might be that your dog got friendly with the yellow jackets in the yard. Or your cat made a leap for the top of the armoire and didn't quite get there. Or the dreaded test results came back.

Whether it's an unexpected illness or an accident or injury, pet insurance is a great way to protect your pet's health and provide peace of mind should something traumatic happen.

Pet insurance works in much the same way as human insurance. You pay a premium each month, and when you go to the vet you'll usually pay at the clinic and then submit a claim, along with your receipts, for reimbursement of covered expenses. Just like human insurance, pet insurance companies usually have some kind of annual deductible. There are no "out-of-network" providers with pet insurance. As long as your vet is licensed, your expenses should be covered, and there's no need to wonder if your plan is in network.

The national average cost of pet insurance for a dog is \$46/month and for a cat, it's \$23/month, and the most common type of insurance covers accidents and illness. You can also get accident-only insurance, which will cover costs related to an accidental injury but won't cover costs for diagnosing or treating an illness. Wellness plans, which cover preventive care and routine services, are typically an add-on to an accident and illness plan, but they can sometimes be purchased separately. These plans cover standard services such as wellness exams, vaccinations, bloodwork, microchipping, and parasite tests. A stand-alone wellness plan would not cover any of the costs associated with an illness or injury.

Depending on your provider, pet insurance might also

cover things you might not normally think of, such as dental care; alternative therapies like acupuncture, massage, and chiropractic; behavioral therapies; prescription diets; and the costs of euthanasia, cremation, or burial. Providers won't typically cover things like breeding expenses, pre-existing conditions, elective or cosmetic surgeries, or pet liability.

Most pet insurance companies offer an array of options from which to choose, depending on your budget and the needs of your pet, so shop around to compare plans and policies, keeping in mind that things like breed, your pet's age, treatment costs for any hereditary or potential conditions, where you live, and the amount of coverage you choose can all affect your monthly premiums. Also look for a plan with unlimited benefits. Your monthly premiums will be higher, but it's good to know your pet has unlimited coverage.

You can easily find coverage in most areas for dogs, cats, and exotic pets, but if you have exotics that are venomous, endangered, illegal to own, kept on display, or kept in large numbers, you'll have a little more trouble finding coverage. You might be on your own if you're keeping a collection of rattlesnakes under your bed!

How do you know if you need pet insurance? There's no law requiring you to buy it for your pet, and many people do just fine without it. If your pet is young, relatively healthy, or not prone to injuries or accident, then paying vet bills yourself is likely cheaper than buying insurance. But if your pet is older, likely to develop a severe illness, or is at risk of injury, then pet insurance is worth considering. It will give you peace of mind, and any decisions about your pet's care that you might need to make in the future will be much easier.



From Easy Prey to a Life of Ease: The Ongoing Mission of Rescuing Dumped Ducks

By Sharon Boyles



It's always fun to go to the park to see the ducks and maybe feed them a treat or two. But did you ever wonder how some of those ducks came to be there?

Duck dumping is a common practice in the US, and it happens much more often than you'd think. Each year, thousands of domestic ducks who started out as pets are abandoned in outdoor areas such as parks, lakes, and ponds. The cute little fluffballs at the feed store eventually grow up to be adult ducks, and many people either aren't prepared to care for them, or they simply don't want to. It's harder to rehome a duck than it is a cat or a dog, so most people simply take them to an outdoor area and leave them there.

This seems like an optimal solution, however, what most people don't realize is that dumping domestic ducks outdoors is not only illegal in some places, but it can also be a death sentence for the duck. Laura Amanns, a volunteer with Mid-Ohio Waterfowl in Shelby, OH, emphasizes that domestic ducks aren't equipped to live in the wild.

"People will get [ducks] as pets and think they're cute, but then they become too much to handle and take care of. So, they're dumped at parks. Most domestic ducks don't know how to survive on their own and because ducks are prey animals, they have no defense mechanisms, and domestic ducks can't fly. They're literally sitting ducks," she says. "They need to have regular care and be kept safe at night so they don't become a predator's dinner. Sometimes a dumped duck can find a clan of wild ducks to hang out with, but until then, they're extremely vulnerable. Dumping is a continuous cycle: People buy, then dump, then other

people rescue, people buy, then dump, then other people rescue...."

Lisa Dowd, who founded Mid-Ohio Waterfowl rescue, was inspired to begin her rescue work after noticing the sudden appearance of an entire flock of domestic ducks at a park. "I frequented this park on breaks between my college classes," she says. "I went to feed the geese one day, and I saw a flock of seven pekin ducks that weren't there the day before. On my regular visits to the park, I watched the flock dwindle because of predators or I would see injuries. That's when I realized that I needed to intervene, and I decided to get started. So many ducks get dumped or abandoned because people decide they don't want them. I didn't realize it was such a thing." Lisa founded Mid-Ohio Waterfowl in 2015, and in her time caring for abandoned waterfowl, she's seen just about everything. "Nothing surprises me," she laughs. "We once rescued a box of baby ducks from a gas station. This happens all over the U.S., and with social media, people are constantly posting about ducks who get dumped." She began growing her rescue in 2017, and since that time, well over 1,000 ducks have come through her doors. "I get a lot of calls from people who buy ducklings at feed stores, and those quickly grow up. I've done a lot of rescues at Delhi Park, and I get calls from neighboring states. There aren't many waterfowl rescues in the US, so it's hard for people to find help."

She currently has 250-300 ducks in residence, with volunteers who come and help when she has projects. Lisa, her husband and her aunt are the core team, caring

for the waterfowl year-round. The most fulfilling part of Lisa's work is saving ducks who wouldn't otherwise have a chance. "Each life that I have saved means so much, because they're so overlooked," she says. "People don't care about ducks. But even when their situation isn't good, I've seen them pull through. I've seen a lot of loss and bad stuff, but it's the good that keeps me going. If I can save one life, it's worth it."

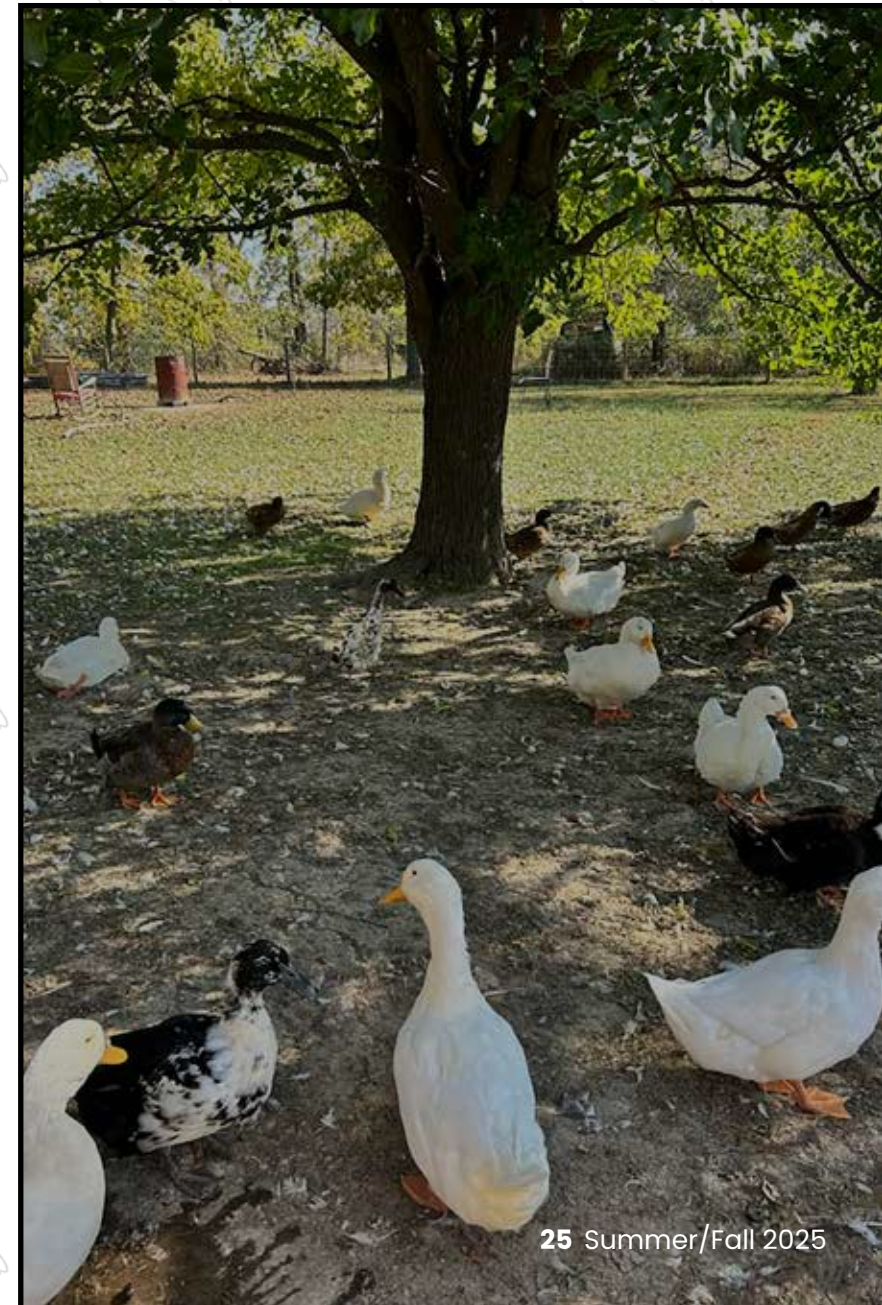
Laura has also experienced "the good" in her volunteer work. "We once rescued 10-15 domestic ducks from a park on the west side," she says. "And in Springfield, we rescued 8-9 geese. Ducks and geese can easily get caught up in fishing line and get stuck. I've helped with Canada geese who have gotten stuck in fishing line, and one of my favorite stories is about the goose who had fishing line so deeply embedded in his feet that it probably left marks. You'd think as soon as we freed him, he would be off. But when we released him, he went to the edge of the water and looked back at us, stretching his feet out. It was like a thank you." Both Laura and Lisa agree that ducks have a lot of personality. They can understand their name and come for food. "Like a dog with feathers," Lisa jokes. Her first duck, a Mallard who is now 12, was found lost and wandering, so she took him in and raised him. He imprinted on Lisa, and after accidentally being stepped on as a baby, he was named Stumpy, because of his limp.

Laura emphasizes that education is key when adopting waterfowl. They're a lot of work, and ducks can live 6-7 years, depending on breed, and sometimes up to 15 years with really good care and good genetics. Keep in mind that most vets won't see ducks because their anatomy is so different, and anyone considering adopting waterfowl would need to find an avian specialist, which is typically more expensive than a regular vet. Waterfowl are flock creatures, so it's also best to have several together, instead of one by itself.

For anyone interested in adopting waterfowl and making the commitment, Lisa suggests a setup of a predator-proof enclosure that is available day and night, but especially at night, to protect from weasels, mink, foxes, and raccoons. It's also critical for waterfowl to have a clean water source, such as a baby pool or big water dishes. You don't necessarily need a pond, just a water source where they can bathe and dunk to keep their eyes and nose (nares) clean. Proper food is important, too. Ducklings need a certain kind of feed for growing bodies, and the adults' main diet is a specific waterfowl food, along with grapes, watermelon, lettuce, berries, and frozen peas. Bread and rolled oats should be given only occasionally as treats.

Lisa shares that there aren't a lot of people calling her to adopt because most people just buy baby ducks down at the feed store. "They sell baby ducks from just before Easter until September, and they're marked down when they don't sell. It's just sad. There's just not enough people to adopt, and nobody out there is looking for that many pets. We have enough animals already. Please stop breeding, and adopt instead."

If you're interested in adopting new friends from Mid-Ohio Waterfowl, please message Lisa through her Facebook page: Mid-Ohio Waterfowl Rescue.



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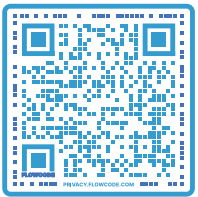
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Hot Days, Cool Pets: Simple Ways to Keep Your Pets Safe

Sunny days bring backyard cookouts, outdoor adventures, and more time with your four-legged family members. But as we head outside to enjoy the warm weather, it's easy to forget that heat and humidity can take a serious toll on our pets, sometimes faster than we expect.

At AcutePet Urgent Care, we often treat pets in distress from heat-related emergencies – many of which could have been avoided with a little preparation. Let's talk about some simple, no-cost steps you can take to help your pets stay safe, cool, and comfortable during those hot days.

Why Humidity Makes It Worse

We all know hot days can be dangerous, but humidity takes it to another level. Dogs and cats don't sweat like we do – they rely mostly on panting to cool off. When the air is muggy, that cooling system stops working as well, and heat builds up quickly inside their bodies. If you're feeling sticky and uncomfortable, chances are your pet is, too – and they don't have as many ways to cope.

Watch for These Red Flags

Heat stress can sneak up fast. Even a short time outside or in a hot room can put your pet at risk. Here are a few things we always tell pet owners to look for:

- Heavy or rapid panting that doesn't slow down
- Bright red gums or tongue
- Thick drool
- Wobbly movements or acting disoriented
- Vomiting or diarrhea
- Collapse or unresponsiveness

If you see any of these, move your pet to a cool area right away and call us or your veterinarian. With locations in Beavercreek, West Chester, and Bellevue, we're here for these exact situations.

Simple Ways to Stay Safe (That Don't Cost a Thing)

Keeping your pet comfortable doesn't have to be complicated or expensive. Here are a few easy steps you can take today:

- **Find the shade.** Whether it's a tree, umbrella, or side of the house, make sure there's always a cool spot to retreat to.
- **Water, water, water.** Fresh, cool water should always be available, indoors and out.
- **Walk when it's cooler.** Early mornings and evenings are much safer than midday heat.
- **Pavement check.** If it's too hot for your hand, it's too hot for their paws.
- **Never leave pets in the car.** Even with the windows cracked, the inside of a car can hit deadly temperatures in minutes.

Who's at Higher Risk?

Some pets just don't tolerate heat as well. If your pet falls into one of these categories, extra caution is a must:

- Flat-faced breeds like Bulldogs, Pugs, and Persians
- Older pets and young puppies or kittens
- Pets carrying extra weight
- Animals with heart or breathing issues

These pets are more vulnerable and can overheat much faster, even on days that feel comfortable to us.

Humidity Hacks You Might Not Know

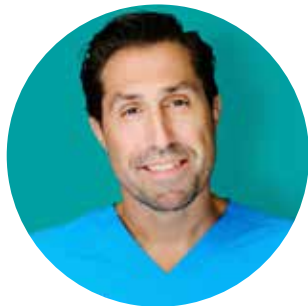
Sometimes it's not just the heat, it's how heavy the air feels. A few small adjustments can make a big difference:

- Use fans or air conditioning whenever you can.
- Let your pet stretch out on cool tile floors instead of carpet.
- Drape a damp towel over them or lightly mist their fur with water if they're getting warm.

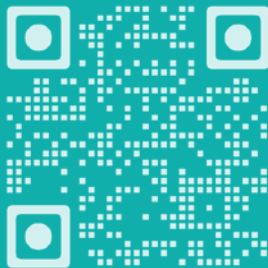
"Education and preparation are truly lifesaving when it comes to heat-related emergencies," says John D. Anastasio, DVM, DACVECC, our Chief Medical Officer and Critical Care Specialist here at AcutePet. "If you ever feel unsure about how your pet is handling the heat, don't wait – reach out. We're here every day of the year, and no question is too small."

We're Here for You

Warm days should be a time for making memories – not unexpected emergencies. With just a little planning and awareness, you can help your pets stay comfortable and healthy all season long. If something doesn't feel right, or you simply want peace of mind, AcutePet Urgent Care is always here to help. We're just a call or a quick visit away – so you and your pets can get back to enjoying everything you love about this time of year.



John D. Anastasio
DVM, DACVECC, Chief Medical Officer



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Chow-Chows: There's a Sweetheart Within the Stoic

By Sharon Boyles



Chows have a reputation for being aloof, aggressive, and overly protective of their hoomans, and with their distinctive, floofy appearance, serious face, almond eyes, unusual blue-black tongue, and sturdy, stocky build, they can appear fierce and intimidating. But is their reputation for aggression and aloofness truly warranted?

According to Forbes, Chow attacks are significantly rarer than attacks from other breeds, and while there is some truth in the perceptions around Chows, they don't tell the whole story of who these dogs are.

The history of Chow-Chows goes back a long way. They are one of the oldest dog breeds in the world, originating over 2,000 years ago in northern China. They were bred to be guardians

of the nobility, hunters, herd dogs and sometimes sled dogs, and they were symbols of power and affluence among the upper classes. They also had roles as guardians of temples and imperial palaces and were known as Songshi Quan, meaning 'puffy-lion dog.'

The puffy lions began making their way west on 19th century trade ships, and the breed's name most likely came from the term that East India Company traders used to refer to their cargoes. Everything (including dogs) was referred to as chow chow. The name does not have a specific meaning related to the breed's characteristics or to Chinese culture.

Upon their arrival, first in Europe and later in the U.S., their role began to change dramatically to that of companion dogs and show dogs. The stately Chow became "all the rage" in the U.S. and was seen as a symbol of wealth and fashion in the upper classes and among celebrities. In 1903, the American Kennel Club officially recognized the Chow Chow.

Several Chow owners spoke with Natipets about their experiences, and they revealed quite a different viewpoint around these dogs. Janet T.* has owned three Chows and describes the experience as a pleasure. "I can attest to their loyal nature," she says. "They can be stubborn at times, but that's part of their charm. Socialization is crucial to help them become confident and calm in new situations."

Donna P., who has owned five chows and recently adopted an amazing chow mix, notes

that she regularly hears from people not familiar with Chows that they are 'one owner dogs.' "Not true!" she says. "These very intelligent dogs know when they are loved!" She also debunks the myth that Chows are so aloof that they shouldn't be approached. While it's true that they aren't necessarily as demonstrative as other types of dogs, Donna recalls that she had a really sweet Chow who once laid quietly on a sidewalk and allowed an entire girls' soccer team to pet her.

Jesse X. has had a similarly positive experience with his Chow. "Our Cinnamon Brown Bear is great with children and sniffs them up and down whenever they come into the house, like any good mama bear would," he says. "We have had many social gatherings at our home and she lets everyone pet her. Our family loves her like our fur baby, and she is a great security addition to any home. Cinnamon will patrol the whole perimeter of the house and sleep by the door. She is gentle with us and provides so much joy to our whole family. Cinnamon represents loyalty, love, family and companionship. Best dog ever!"

Chow owner Jennifer G. is certain that Chows are the only breed she'll ever have, and she agrees with Janet that their loyalty is unmatched.



Steven M. perhaps sums it up best by saying, "Love me some Chows! Best breed ever!"

These wonderful and dignified dogs can be a great addition to the family, but be sure to do your research before buying or rescuing one so that you are equipped to care for their unique personality and needs. Socialization and training are important for all dogs, but especially so for a Chow because of their long history as guard dogs. They are very territorial, and it's in their nature to be fiercely protective of home and family. In an untrained dog, this can show up as aggression towards strangers or other dogs and aggression in new and unfamiliar situations. It's critical to be a responsible pet parent and start socialization and training early. Be firm (but not punishing), be patient, and stay with it, because Chows are sometimes stubborn and resistant.

Besides proper socialization and training, a calm and stable environment and consistent veterinary care and grooming will go a long way in maintaining a rewarding relationship with your Chow and cultivate the sweetheart within the stoic.





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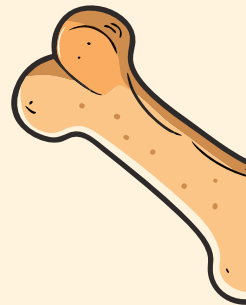
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Pet Friendly Treats

Muffin's Kitchen

Peanut Butter Doggy Treats

- 2 cups of whole wheat flour ¾ cp water
- ¼ cup peanut butter creamy one large egg
- 1 cup toasted wheat germ 2 tbsp of canola oil
- 1/2 tsp cinnamon

Preheat oven to 350, combine flour, wheat germ, cinnamon together, then stir in remaining ingredients. On flour surface roll out dough to your desire thickness, cut with a 3 inch bone shape cookie cutter or you can make balls and press down with a spoon to form a circle.

Place two inches apart on a parchment lined cookie sheet, Bake until bottoms are lightly brown (tops may crack a bit), Bake for 30-35 minutes. Completely cool on a rack, store in a airtight container for 1 month.

Hope your fur baby enjoys this treat!!!!

Dress Your Pet to the Nines

By Talandor Elias

What could be cuter (or more guaranteed to be a hit on social media) than your pet dressed to the nines in a cozy autumn sweater or Halloween costume, or walking down the aisle in a wedding tux?

While most dogs are pretty much okay with the occasional dress up (and some dogs will even wear their princess ballerina togs with pride), there are a few dogs out there who will run for the hills when the sweater comes out. If your dog is one of them, there are some important steps to follow to ensure that this is a pleasant experience for everyone.

Start with letting your dog sniff and become familiar with the clothing. If that goes okay, start with one or two pieces of clothing and sort of drape them over your dog's back so they can get a feel for it. If that's a green light, fit them into the outfit and let them wear it for no more than a minute. Treats should definitely be involved at every stage of this process. If your pup shows any signs of distress or fear at any stage of the process, don't press the issue. Depending on the strength of your dog's objection, either save it for another day or let it go completely. If the clothing is a clear no, you can still create a seasonal look with a bandanna, scarf or bow tied to their collar.

Before you buy anything, no matter how cute it looks online,

take measurements to make sure it won't be too loose or too tight and make sure it doesn't have any decorations that are sharp, in awkward places, or small enough to be potentially swallowed. Make sure the fabric isn't itchy and is appropriate for the season. Don't send your dog out into the summer heat wearing a hoodie.

What about cats? As a general rule, most cats will eternally hate you if you try to dress them up. Some breeds, such as hairless cats, might appreciate a sweater in the winter, but most felines think they're cute enough as is and don't want to wear a cape or a T-shirt and overalls.

For the rare feline who enjoys a little extra bling, the process of adjusting a cat to clothing is similar to that for a dog. Go slow, shower them with treats, and don't force the issue. If your cat accepts, be sure that the costume is made of a soft and comfortable fabric that won't bind or keep them from their cleaning routine. If it's a clear no, you can simply dress your cat up in elegant ways with bow ties, scarves, or small berets or cute newsboy caps.

Remember that animals don't really need to wear clothes. If it's something your pet enjoys, then go for it. If not, there are other ways to help your pet be cute and festive!

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Marcia and her precious kitty, Muffin.

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Every Purchase Can Save Paws at Busam Subaru! Insight On The Rich History and Community Efforts of Busam Subaru

Located in the heart of Fairfield, Ohio, Busam Subaru provides customers with the best Subaru inventory and deals in the Tri-State area. Busam Subaru was established in 2006, but the dealership originates from historic roots as part of the Busam Automotive family of dealerships. Busam Automotive is Ohio's oldest continuously running car family. Since 1909, the family has strived to make a difference in the lives of customers, coworkers, and the community. Busam Automotive is family-owned and operated, and proud that every customer can count on being treated like a member of the family!

Busam Subaru is a proud partner of the Subaru Love Promise Campaign, in which Subaru retailers support the vision of making the world a better place and respecting all people. The team at Busam Subaru is committed to exemplifying love and respect for their customers and strives to make a positive impact in the world every day. As part of the Subaru Love Promise Campaign, Busam Subaru will be kicking off the Share the Love Event on November 20, 2025. The dealership is excited to donate \$250 for every new car purchased through the New Year to the customer's choice of charitable organizations that include, ASPCA, Meals on Wheels, Make-A-Wish, and the National Park Foundation. After 15 years, the Subaru Share the Love program has generated over \$256 million for charitable organizations throughout the world.

For over 5 years, Busam Subaru has hosted a pet adoption event for the Animal Friends Humane Society. The event takes place in the parking lot of the dealership and welcomes all families to check out the sweet pets that are locally up for adoption. This year, the Busam Subaru Animal Friends Pet Adoption Event

will take place at Busam Subaru on October 9th, 2025, from 11:00 am-4:00 pm.

Busam Subaru is one of the premier Subaru dealers in the area, so we always have a healthy selection of new Subaru models for shoppers to explore. Customers can always find fan favorites such as the Subaru Impreza, Crosstrek, Forester, Outback, and Ascent. Busam Subaru also offers a vast inventory of pre-owned cars, trucks, and SUVs, as well as Certified Pre-Owned Subaru vehicles. Busam Subaru is also equipped with a state-of-the-art Service Center that is staffed by factory-trained, Subaru-Certified service technicians with decades of experience. Additionally, customers can purchase genuine, authentic Subaru parts and accessories through the Busam Subaru Parts Center.

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News of Note: Pets In Need of Greater Cincinnati Receives Two Grants

By: Sonya Stone

In June 2025, Pets In Need of Greater Cincinnati was awarded a \$15,000 Animal Welfare Grant from Greater Cincinnati Foundation in recognition of the organization's continued impact in the community.

This award reflects Pets In Need's dedication to keeping pets healthy and together with the families who love them, especially those facing financial hardship. Through its low-cost veterinary clinic in Lockland, the organization provides essential care to thousands of pets each year, removing barriers to treatment and supporting the human-animal bond across Greater Cincinnati. Greater Cincinnati Foundation's support affirms the importance of accessible veterinary care in building a compassionate and thriving region, which it demonstrates through grants to nonprofit organizations with initiatives and projects that protect, respect, and nurture the well-being of pets, neglected animals, and the entire animal kingdom.

This funding will ensure that pets are able to get advanced care surgical services regardless of their owner's income. Surgery can be lifesaving and, in many cases, dramatically improve a pet's quality of life. "It's a heartbreaking reality when a family is forced to forgo necessary surgical care simply because of costs they cannot afford. The outcome is often devastating - for both the pet and their person. This funding offers an alternative" says Pam McKie, PIN Executive Director. "GCF is proud to support nonprofit partners like Pets in Need, whose commitment to animal welfare strengthens our region by fostering compassion, well-being, and stronger connections between people, animals, and the communities we share," said Adison Nelson, senior director, community investments, Greater Cincinnati Foundation.

Pets In Need of Greater Cincinnati was also awarded a \$50,000 grant from The Joanie C. Bernard Foundation in June to support its Cats In Need initiative, an effort aimed at improving the overall care for cats, ultimately improving the health outcomes for their feline population. The grant will support expanded outreach, improved accessibility, and enhanced effectiveness of the clinic's feline-specific services. Cats are often disproportionately affected by limited access to veterinary care, and this program aims to change that. Pets In Need will use the funding to remove barriers to care, increase access, increase options for essential medications and prescription diets, while maintaining low fees and providing flexible payment options for families unable to afford the full cost of care/surgery.



Additionally, the clinic will invest in feline-friendly equipment and facility upgrades, including a dedicated cat-only waiting area to create a calmer, more comfortable experience for feline patients. Through this support, Pets In Need also plans to deepen its work with pet owners to understand preventive care and chronic condition management, expand its reach into underserved communities and build additional partnerships with social service organizations to connect pet owners with needed support. All of these efforts aim to keep cats healthy, in homes, and out of shelters or worse abandoned or euthanized before clinically indicated. "Because it's kitten season - the peak time for cat reproduction - the timing could not be more perfect," says Pam McKie. "It is estimated that of the kittens born each year, only 1 in 12 will ultimately find a forever home.

Investing in accessible, affordable veterinary services, especially targeted toward cats, can change the outcome. With interventions including spay/neuter, affordable veterinary care, and community education, this cycle can slow or even stop." "At the Joanie Bernard Foundation, we believe every cat deserves a chance at a healthy, happy life," said Deborah Cribbs, Chair of the Board of Trustees at The Joanie Bernard Foundation and Founder of the Give Them Ten™ Movement. "That's why we're so honored to support Pets In Need and their Cats In Need initiative. This work is about more than veterinary care, it's about keeping families together, easing the worry for pet owners, and giving cats the love and care they deserve." To learn more about Pets In Need and the services it provides, visit www.PINCincinnati.org.

To learn more about Give Them Ten, visit www.GiveThemTen.org



HOW BIOACTIVE ENCLOSURES WORK: SCIENCE OF LITTLE LIVING WORLDS

By Kira Tackett

As someone who has kept all manners of flora and fauna, from native box turtles to the African giant millipedes, I have learned bioactive enclosures are essential for longevity and animal health alike. In essence, they are a self-contained microcosm, equal parts science experiment, garden, and pet home. Instead of sterile, easily-cleaned setups, these enclosures incorporate living elements that all amalgamate together to create a miniature ecosystem. Soil, plants, microfauna, and your animal cohabitate in a balanced cycle of waste breakdown, nutrient cycling, and environmental enrichment. Think of it as giving your pet a home that tidies itself (mostly) and reflects their natural environment...only smaller and devoid of predators!

At the nucleus of a bioactive enclosure is the clean-up crew, such as microorganisms and small invertebrates that break down organic waste before it can rot or cause ammonia spikes. These organisms are known as detritivores or saprophages. Isopods, springtails, beneficial fungi, and bacteria chew through shed skin, leftover food, and droppings, recycling them into plant food (nitrogen, phosphorus, magnetism, zinc, etc.) Beneath your animal's feet, the substrate layers usually include:

- 1. **Drainage layer:** Lightweight expanded clay balls or gravel to prevent waterlogging.
- 2. **Barrier mesh:** Stops soil from sinking

into the drainage layer.

- 3. **Soil layer:** Nutrient-rich, well-aerated substrate for both plants and microfauna alike.
- 4. **Leaf litter:** Hides cleanup crew, helps moisture retention, and mimics natural detritus.

Above, you have plants and decor which are both functional and aesthetic! They provide shelter, regulate humidity, and look far more alive than any plastic rock.

Example: Invertebrates; For a colony of *Narceus americanus* millipedes, a bioactive setup might include:

- **Deep soil mix:** Organic topsoil, decayed hardwood, and leaf litter.
- **Clean-up crew:** Smaller isopods and springtails to handle leftover food and frass (plant matter detritus).
- **Hardwood pieces:** Serve as both a snack and a hideout.
- **Live plants:** Low-light ferns or pothos, which tolerate the humid environment.
- **Avoid:** Any pesticide-treated wood or substrate, as invertebrates are highly sensitive to toxins. Skip strong-fertilizer plants that could leach harmful chemicals into the soil.

Example: Amphibians; For a dart frog terrarium,

you might include:

- **Moisture-retentive substrate:** ABG mix (peat moss, sphagnum moss, orchid bark, charcoal).
- **Plants:** Bromeliads for water-holding leaf axils, mosses for ground cover.
- **Clean-up crew:** Tropical springtails and dwarf white isopods, thriving in constant humidity.
- **Water feature:** A shallow pool or drip wall to keep hydration levels optimal.
- **Avoid:** Gravel or sharp decor that could injure delicate skin. Also, steer clear of large, predatory isopods. They might nibble on eggs or even the frogs themselves.

Example: Reptiles; A crested gecko vivarium might be set up with:

- **Soil blend:** Coco fiber, organic compost, and sand for root stability.
- **Live plants:** Pothos, philodendrons, and snake plants for climbing and cover.
- **Clean-up crew:** Powder orange isopods and tropical springtails, which thrive in the moderate humidity.
- **Branches & cork bark:** Vertical climbing spaces mimicking their arboreal lifestyle.
- **Avoid:** Overly wet conditions that can lead to mold outbreaks, especially with less humidity-tolerant reptiles. Skip plants with irritating sap, like certain euphorbias.

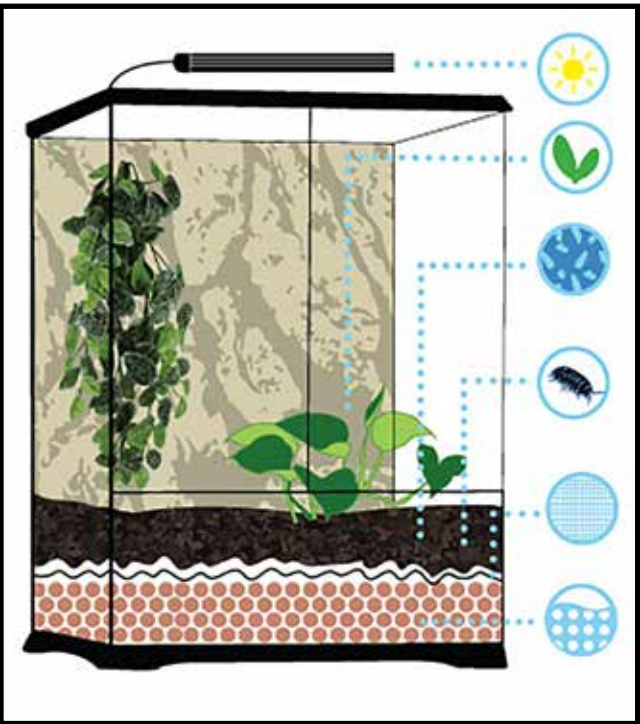
As a system, the magic lies within the nutrient cycle:

1. Your pet produces waste and sheds skin.
2. The clean-up crew consumes and decomposes it.
3. Decomposers release nutrients into the soil.
4. Plants absorb those nutrients, growing lush

and oxygenating the air.

5. Plants help regulate humidity, and their roots prevent substrate compaction.
6. Your pet enjoys a clean, enriched environment, without you constantly scrubbing it.

The enclosure's inhabitants act like tiny janitors, gardeners, and air purifiers rolled into one. While not 100% maintenance-free (spot cleaning and monitoring are still essential), a stable bioactive enclosure dramatically reduces deep-cleaning needs.



Common Pitfalls to Avoid:

- **Skipping quarantine:** Introducing wild-collected plants or animals without treatment risks pests and pathogens. It is recommended to boil or bake any leaf litter beforehand.
- **Overstocking clean-up crews:** Too many can stress or even injure your main animal.
- **Ignoring light requirements:** Live plants need proper UV or grow lights; without them, your system collapses.

- **Overwatering or underwatering:** Either can cause mold blooms or mass die-offs in the microfauna.

To blend science and art all in the name of animal care is a beautiful thing. Done right, bioactive enclosures embody the joy of observing a miniature world humming along, where even the most miniscule springtail is a factor of the grand gestalt...and all you must do is watch, feed, and occasionally join in the leaf-litter rustling party.



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