

# NATIPETS

SPRING 2026 | ISSUE 7

**FREE**

**THE COVER STORY:  
FLEMISH GIANT RABBIT**

**COOL CRITTER  
OUTREACH**

**MEET MARSHMALLOW  
THE HOGNOSE SNAKE**



**GOT POOP? WE SCOOP**  
SEE PAGE 2 (INSIDE COVER)  
FOR DETAILS AND SPECIALS

# NATIPETS

NatiPets LLC  
PO Box 753  
Batavia, OH 45103  
513-518-0262

**Publisher**  
Matt Tackett  
Matt@NatiPets.Com

**Editor in Chief**  
Kira Tackett  
Kira@natipets.com

**Account Executive**  
Donna Davis  
Theadladycincy@gmail.com

**Writers**  
Matt Tackett  
Kira Tackett  
Sharon Boyles

**Assistant to the Publisher**  
Shannon Tackett

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## PUBLISHER'S VIEW HAVE A GREAT SUMMER EVERYONE

It's been a great pleasure, once again bringing Cincinnati and the tri-state another edition of NatiPets. I want to thank all our advertisers for their continued support, and our loyal readers who email in their ideas for stories and their kind words of encouragement and praise. Our dog Jackson is now six years old and continues to bring great joy to Shannon and my life. My daughter Kira has done a great job taking the editorial of NatiPets to the next level of fun and overall great reading. I hope you all enjoy reading our newest edition, Spring 2026. Until next time, Matt Tackett, Publisher.

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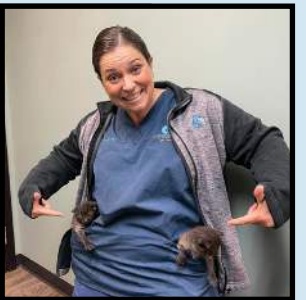
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# The Cover Story: Keeping Rabbits in Cincinnati, Featuring the Flemish Giant

By: Kira Tackett

Raising a rabbit in the Queen City is a total joy, but it isn't just "carrots and cuddles!" From tiny Dwarfs to hefty Flemish Giants, these social brainiacs have personalities of their own, being highly social, intelligent mammals that thrive on routine and interaction. Contrary to the common misconception that they are low-maintenance pets, rabbits actually require attentive care and mental stimulation; one of which is in the form of chew toys made of untreated wood, cardboard tunnels, and digging boxes which helps satisfy their natural behaviors. As rabbits are biologically colony animals, social interaction is crucial. Many rabbits enjoy the companionship of another rabbit, provided introductions are handled carefully and both animals are spayed or neutered. In Cincinnati's climate which is characterized by an unpredictable deterring between hot and cold, indoor housing is strongly recommended - they can even be litter-trained to make this arrangement more manageable! If outdoor time is provided, it should be supervised and limited to mild weather conditions, for heat is particularly dangerous for rabbits; temperatures above 80°F can lead to heat stress. During summer months ensure adequate ventilation, provide frozen water bottles for cooling, and avoid direct sunlight. In winter, indoor housing

eliminates the risk of frostbite and hypothermia. Local regulations in Cincinnati generally allow rabbits as companion animals without special permits, but it is always wise to check neighborhood or housing association rules!

One specific species has made its mark in the rabbit-keeping community. Meet the Flemish Giant, the undisputed "Gentle Giant" of the bunny world. Tipping the scales at a whopping 13 to 20+ pounds, these European imports are basically the Golden Retrievers of rabbits, being calm, friendly, and total fans of human attention. But remember: big bunnies need big upgrades! You'll need a "super-sized" setup, from the litter box to the hay pile. To keep those joints jumping and prevent obesity, give them a full rabbit-proofed room to roam. And because they carry so much weight, cushioned flooring like foam mats is a non-negotiable to keep their hocks healthy and sore-free - a painful condition known as pododermatitis. Flemish Giants, with their gentle personalities, often form strong bonds with not only other rabbits and their humans but a variety of other animal species as well, provided their interactions are supervised.

## A rabbit's diet is foremost fundamental to its health. The cornerstone of proper nutrition is:

A steady supply of timothy hay, which supports digestive function and helps wear down continuously growing teeth.

- Fresh leafy greens such as romaine lettuce, cilantro, parsley, and dandelion greens should be offered daily.
- High-quality pellets can be provided in moderation.
- Fresh water must always be available, preferably in a heavy ceramic bowl as rabbits have a tendency to knock over anything lighter.
- Treats like fruits and carrots should be given sparingly due to their sugar content. For Flemish Giants, portion sizes will naturally be larger, but the dietary balance remains the same as for smaller breeds.

Regular veterinary care is essential for maintaining a rabbit's health. Annual checkups with an exotic animal veterinarian are recommended, as rabbits have specialized medical needs compared to that of dogs or cats. Spaying or neutering not only prevents unwanted litters but also reduces the risk of reproductive cancers and improves behavior. Ohio is home to several rabbit-focused resources, including rescue organizations and educational groups that support responsible ownership and adoption:

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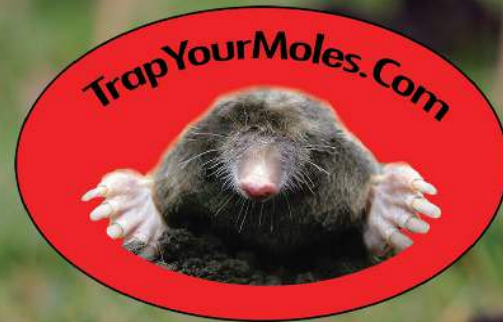
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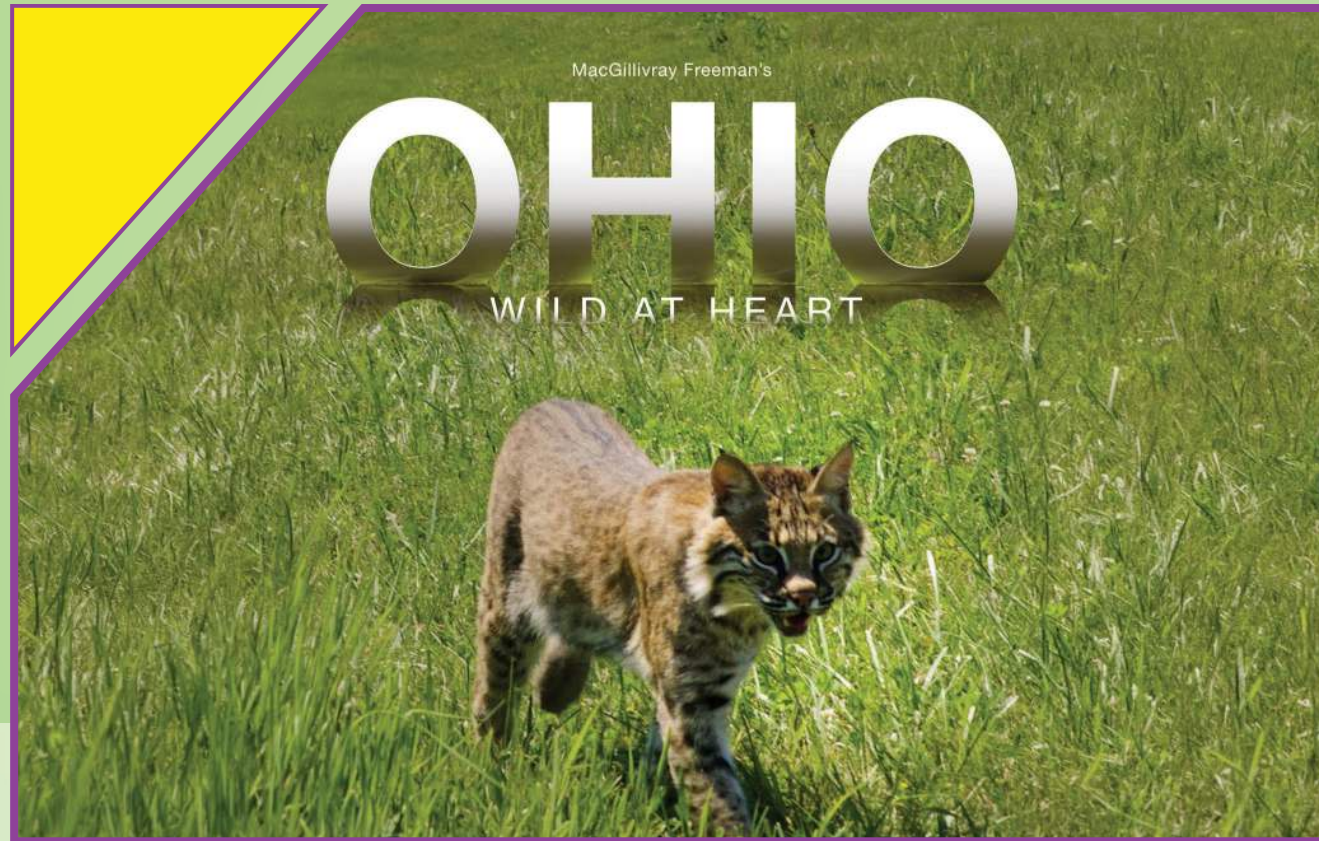


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# Cincinnati Nature Center: BOBCATS IN OHIO

By: Kira Tackett



Meet the shadow of the North American wilds: the Bobcat (*Lynx rufus*). Distinguished by its namesake 'bobbed' tail and elegant ear tufts, these cats are about twice the size of a domestic cat, typically weighing between 9 and 40 pounds. Masters of adaptation, they thrive in forests, wetlands, and even the edges of suburban areas, using dense cover to hunt rabbits, rodents, birds and occasionally, a weakened deer. They are also mostly solitary and crepuscular, meaning they are most active at dawn and dusk...one of the reasons you're far more likely to miss a bobcat than ever see one!

Here's the exciting part: bobcats are making a comeback in Ohio.

Once driven to the brink of disappearance by the twin pressures of hunting and habitat loss, bobcats are now slowly reclaiming their range. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources reports that bobcat sightings began rising steadily in the early 2000s, and from 1970 to 2021 there were 4,159 confirmed sightings in the state. More recent summaries note that Ohio has recorded more than 500 confirmed sightings annually since 2019. As mesopredators, meaning they occupy a mid-level position in the food chain, bobcats help regulate prey populations. This natural population control prevents overgrazing and reduces the spread of diseases among prey species. Their predation also contributes to what ecologists call a trophic cascade, which is a process where predators indirectly influence vegetation and ecosystem structure. For example:

by keeping rabbit and rodent populations in check, bobcats help protect young trees and understory plants which in turn, promotes healthier forests and more diverse habitats.

One of the groups helping people understand this importance is the Cincinnati Nature Center. The Nature Center spans over 1,600 acres of forests, streams, and trails, serving as both a wildlife sanctuary and an educational hub. Programs hosted here are designed to connect people with local wildlife through hands-on learning, guided hikes, and expert-led discussions featuring Shauna Weyrauch, a Senior Lecturer at The Ohio State University Newark and co-founder of Project Wild Coshocton. A research effort that has used trail cameras since 2015 to document bobcats in east-central Ohio, Project Wild Coshocton itself has expanded camera-trapping work in counties such as Coshocton, Holmes, Licking, and Knox, and has also experimented with artificial den sites to learn what bobcats need to settle and reproduce.

Such educational events, including wildlife-focused programs like the bobcat-themed sessions referenced, help visitors understand how animals like bobcats now coexist with humans, emphasizing:

- How to identify bobcat tracks and signs
- The ecological role of predators
- How habitat conservation supports wildlife recovery
- Practical ways humans can coexist with native species

The Nature Center's mission is simple: rooted in passion to inspire a love for the wild through the power of experience. The bobcat's return serves as a brilliant reminder that conservation works. Though you may never cross paths with one of these elusive cats, their presence in our woods is a victory in itself. It is a sure sign that Ohio's natural world is healing, finding its way back to a balance that hasn't been felt in generations.



# MONARCH WATCH: RAISING MONARCHS, RAISING HOPE!

by: Kira Tackett

Participate in our monarch research project  
with a Monarch Watch Tagging Kit!



There's something truly magical about holding a monarch caterpillar in your hand, knowing that this tiny, striped creature is part of one of the most extraordinary migrations on Earth. For me, that spark started early, from watching them as a child and now as an adult, raising monarchs alongside my mother through Monarch Watch. Founded by the lepidopterist Orley R. "Chip" Taylor, the organisation was conceived to combine education, research, and conservation around one of nature's most evocative migrations.

Monarch Watch articulates its mission as follows: **"Monarch Watch strives to provide the public with information about the biology of monarch butterflies, their spectacular migration, and how to use monarchs to further science education in primary and secondary schools. We engage in research on monarch migration biology and monarch population dynamics... We also promote protection of monarch habitats throughout North America."** Its broader vision reflects an urgent cross-border stewardship: **"In recognition of the rapid loss of habitats and resources needed by monarch butterflies in the United States, Canada, and Mexico, our vision is the preservation of the monarch migration will require stewardship by the governments and private citizens of all three countries."** These citizens consist of not only scientists and students but everyday people into one massive fluttering network of **"community scientists"**, offering everyone the chance to contribute to real scientific research while experiencing the wonder of metamorphosis firsthand!

Seeing this metamorphosis in action, raising monarch caterpillars is both simple and scientifically fascinating. Female monarchs lay their eggs exclusively on milkweed (*Asclepias* spp.), the sole food source for their larvae. Milkweed contains cardiac glycosides which are chemical compounds that monarchs store in their tissues, making them distastefully poisonous to predators. This evolutionary adaptation is a perfect example of the relationship between plant chemistry and insect survival. The caterpillar then progresses through five growth stages, known as instars, before forming a jade-

green chrysalis. After about 10-14 days, an adult butterfly emerges, pumps fluid into its wings, and prepares for flight.

One of the programme's most remarkable efforts is the great tagging initiative: volunteers carefully affix coded stickers to the hindwings of monarchs, sometimes wild, sometimes raised by hand, to trace their migration from North America to Mexico's highland forests. Each recovered tag becomes a piece of a vast map, revealing when and where the travelers pass, how many endure the journey, and what stories their wings carry. This was the very work my mother and I did together. With milkweed growing in her garden, we gathered the caterpillars there and nurtured them through their fragile metamorphosis. And when the day came, we tagged them gently and let them go, watching the orange flickers vanish into the wind!

Recognising that habitat loss, especially of milkweed and nectar plants, is a principal threat, Monarch Watch launched its Waystation programme in 2005. These certified sites, home gardens, schoolyards, parks, are planted with native milkweeds and nectar flora to sustain monarchs during breeding, migration and overwintering phases. By 2023 the organisation had registered over 46,000 such waystations.

Why Monarchs matter? This wonderful species is renowned for their multi-generational migration, traveling thousands of miles between breeding grounds in North America and overwintering sites in Mexico. No single butterfly completes the entire journey; instead, successive generations continue the cycle. This extraordinary phenomenon highlights the interconnectedness of ecosystems across international borders. Monarch Watch's work illuminates how factors such as climate change (e.g., warmer March or September temperatures), habitat loss, and agricultural practices are altering migration success. Moreover, by engaging schools, citizen scientists and gardeners, Monarch Watch brings science out of the lab and into backyards, like what it did with ours. In a world where wild corridors are shrinking and anthropogenic pressures mounting, this selfless organization offers both an elegy and a hope to inspire curiosity, stewardship, and a deeper appreciation for the natural world no mere reading of text books would be able to replicate for future generations to come.



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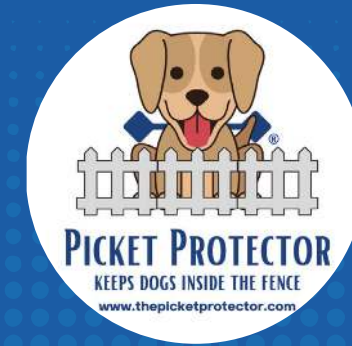
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"I got this for my mom for her birthday. They have a fenced in back yard but our small dog has gotten through many times. She loves the look and quality of the harness and the peace of mind it gives her. She can now relax in her backyard."

Emily - Raleigh, NC

★★★★★

"It did exactly what it's designed to do! My little one kept going through the gate into my neighbor's yard, or he'll get out and run back and forth in front of the house until he decided to return to his own yard."

Lashawn - Norwalk, CA - Repeat Customer

★★★★★

"I love it! We ordered the Picket Protector for our little boy who loves to be outside but can fit through our porch railing. I feel so much better now letting him go out without panicking that he'll get off the porch. 10/10 recommend!"

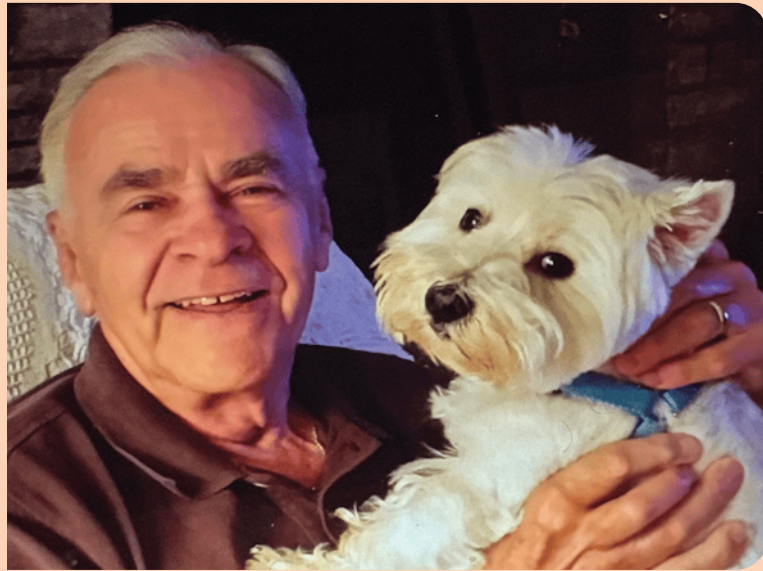
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# Don Klekamp Honors Family with Transformational Gift to Pets In Need

by: Sharon Boyles



PetsInNeedofGreaterCincinnati is proud to recognize a transformational gift from Don Klekamp, whose lifelong legacy of service, compassion, and generosity continues to uplift and inspire our community. In loving memory of his late wife, Marianne, and their cherished Westie, Lily,

Don has made a remarkable \$100,000 contribution to help families facing financial hardship access critical, and often lifesaving, veterinary care. A lifelong Cincinnati and recipient of the Great Living Cincinnati Award, Don Klekamp has made a lasting impact on the city he calls home. He was an original shareholder and longtime director at Cintas Corporation for most of his career and is a founding partner at Keating Muething & Klekamp PLL, where he remains active today. Among many honors throughout his distinguished legal and civic career, he was most recently awarded the St. Francis Xavier Medal by Xavier University, a distinction that is given to few and speaks volumes about his character, contributions, and commitment to service.

Despite his many achievements, Don is quick to credit those around him. In every conversation, he brings it back to family – his devoted parents and siblings, his beloved late wife, Marianne, and their five children. “I was raised in a home filled with faith, family values, a strong work ethic, and a moral compass,” he shared. “My late wife was my foundation, my rock. Together we raised a wonderful family, built meaningful personal and professional relationships, and created a life

rooted in gratitude and generosity.” Don’s giving is as thoughtful as it is generous. “It brings me great joy to give back,” he says, “whether in support of law, causes that reflect my passions, or most recently, in honor of Marianne’s passions.” That includes supporting her college sorority, programs that provide the arts for youth, and now, a cause dear to both their hearts: pets. “Don’s gift to Pets In Need will not only support families in crisis, those facing poverty, housing instability, or other challenges that put veterinary care out of reach, but will also help invest in the veterinary professionals who make our mission possible,” said Pam McKie, Executive Director of Pets In Need. “This extraordinary generosity helps keep pets healthy and in the homes of the families who love them. It truly keeps pets and people together.” Through his thoughtful philanthropy, Don Klekamp honors the people and values that shaped his life while creating a legacy of care, compassion, and community impact that will be felt for years to come.

Pets In Need of Greater Cincinnati Pets In Need is committed to helping pets stay healthy and together with the people who love them. Its clinic in Lockland provides comprehensive, low-cost veterinary services for pets from homes in which income is at or below 200% of the federal poverty level. The clinic is the only resource of its kind in Greater Cincinnati, serving over 3,000 pets each year. Our compassionate team is committed to supporting both our clients and their pets with kindness and care. To learn more about Pets In Need and the services it provides, please visit [www.PINCincinnati.org](http://www.PINCincinnati.org).



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# Cool Critter Outreach

by: Kira Tackett

Operating as an exclusively family-owned, Cincinnati-based animal education and rescue organization since 2006, Brian Gill of Cool Critter Outreach describes his program's work as "educational animal experiences for classrooms and beyond," which is a very accurate summary of what makes it so valuable to the hearts of many.

What does Cool Critter Outreach actually do? It connects the bridge between animal lives to people! Schools, scout meetings, church events, libraries, festivals, birthday parties, assemblies, and community gatherings all of which can book hands-on programs built around reptiles, amphibians, invertebrates, mammals, and other small animals under its care. Each of its program options range from standard 40-60 minute presentations with 4-7 animals to larger assembly-style events with tables full of animals for people to see; furthermore, what sets CCO apart is its hands-on approach. These aren't just any passive presentations like you'd experience in a school! Participants can often:

- See animals up close
- Ask questions in real time
- Sometimes even interact directly with them!

There is a profound magic in the hands-on approach. While a textbook can describe a snake, sure, it can never replicate the thrill of a face-to-face encounter. To gently hold a living creature while an educator reveals the secrets of its world - how it senses, what it hunts, and why it is a vital thread in nature - is a lesson that imprints on the heart for a lifetime. Cool Critter Outreach masterfully balances this sense of wonder with a dose of reality, teaching participants not just to admire these



animals, but to understand the serious responsibility of their care. This combination of wonder and responsibility is exactly what animal education should do, and Brian Gill understands that well.

Furthermore, many of the animals in its care came from the tri-state area after being surrendered, abandoned, confiscated by police, or turned over by local animal welfare groups. Cool Critter Outreach then provides care, adopts them into appropriate permanent homes, while others stay as part of the outreach program to give them a second purpose as "ambassadors" - which is any animal used to educate the public, foster empathy for wildlife, and promote conservation. It also emphasizes a message that deserves to be printed in giant letters above every exotic pet aisle: do your research! That message is especially important because the current animals listed in their care include species such as boas, ball pythons, carpet pythons, tortoises, geckos, tarantulas, a western hognose, a blue-tongued skink, a red-eye tree frog, chinchillas, and hissing cockroaches; all of which are exotic animals with highly specific needs involving heat gradients, UVB lighting, humidity control, diet, enclosure size, lifespan, and handling tolerance. Programs like this help people understand that animals are not decorations, or toys, or a last-minute "cool gift"; They are living organisms with biological and behavioral needs, just like any dog or cat!

By connecting three things that are often separated - education, rescue, and public empathy - Cool Critter Outreach helps children and adults replace fear with curiosity, teaches better animal stewardship, and gives rescued animals a meaningful role as ambassadors for their species. That is good for science literacy, good for animal welfare, and frankly, good for the public. When people get to meet a tortoise, a gecko, or even a tarantula up close, "weird" animals start looking a lot less scary and a lot more fascinating, and those moments stick forever. To help build a generation that's more informed, more compassionate, and overall more connected to the natural world.

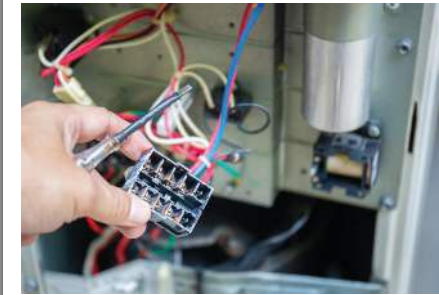


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# Pet Spotlight: Duke and Rudy

By: Sharon Boyles



Life is good down by the riverside, but it's especially good for miniature dachshunds Duke and Rudy.

Duke and Rudy and their owner, J.D. Dorger, live in Milford, near the Little Miami. Duke is a senior gentleman at 12 years old and Rudy is four years old, and both of them enjoy a wonderful life of love and leisure. Rudy is taken on frequent walks along the river (Duke can't walk very far anymore), and they are both given lots of rawhide bones to chew on, a place on the bed every night, and, best of all, pup cup treats!

But life wasn't always so wonderful for Duke. He was born in a puppy mill in Falmouth, KY and spent his first four months there. "He was the last of his litter, and he was living outside in the winter, in the mud, in a shoebox," J.D. recalls. "I decided right then that he was the one I would take home." Duke's life made an incredible turn for the better, but his personality is still a little affected by his early experiences. "He's a good dog," J.D. says, "but he's always been a little bit timid, because of his start in life."

Rudy, however is almost the complete opposite of Duke. "He's very social, always wanting to play, always wagging his tail," J.D. says. Rudy's start in life was a lot better than Duke's, because he was treated very well by his caretaker. He had a

down bed to sleep in, time with his siblings, and a bath every day. J.D. adopted him in Lebanon, OH.

Despite their differences, the two minis get along just fine and even share a love of stuffed toys, although for very different reasons. "Duke likes to suckle and carry the toys around in his mouth because he was taken away from his mother too early," J.D. says. "But Rudy, well, he just tears them up. I go over to St. Vincent de Paul every couple of weeks to get new ones."

Because Duke is getting up there in years, J.D. recently replaced his outdoor stairs with shallow steps to make it easier for Duke to go up and down, and he has ramps around his house. The dogs are allowed to spend time in the enclosed back yard in

nice weather, and they have blankets to lie on and a water bowl, plus plenty of room to romp and play. In the winter, they can come and go as they please through a doggie door.

"They've always been loved," J.D. shares. "They have an easy life, which is what I wanted for them."

Miniature dachshunds were bred in Germany to hunt badgers in their dens, and they generally stay small, averaging 11 pounds. Their coat can range from smooth to wirehaired to longhaired, and it comes in a wide variety of colors. Minis are typically friendly, playful, affectionate, and alert dogs, and they live around 12-16 years. They are athletic and enjoy moderate exercise.



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Why "Seasonal" Protection Falls Short • Modern heating keeps homes at the perfect temperature for fleas and ticks to thrive 365 days a year. • In many regions, winter temperatures never drop cold enough to kill off the pest population. Did you know it has to stay below freezing for at least 30 consecutive days to kill the flea and tick population outdoors? • Raccoons, possums, and other animals can bring fleas and ticks into your yard even in winter. • A single trip to a warmer climate or a visit from an unprotected pet can introduce parasites to your home.

Bottom line: Veterinarians recommend year-round prevention for most pets, regardless of climate.

Written By: Susan Maple, Owner, Mary Puppins LLC

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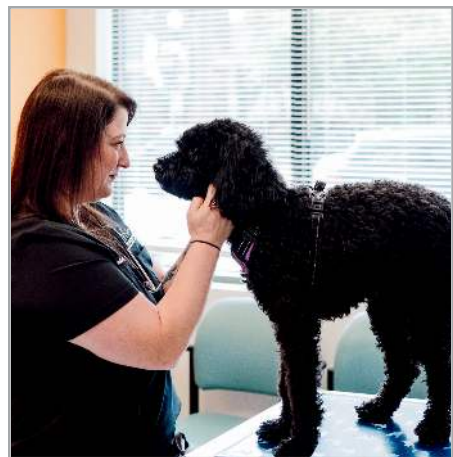
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What happens inside an urgent care visit goes beyond treatment—it's about listening, guiding, and earning trust when it matters most.

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Lindsey Stewart, Practice Manager at AcutePet West Chester shares, "In pet urgent care, listening is just as important as medicine. Pet owners often arrive worried or unsure, so our goal is to understand their concerns, carefully evaluate their pet, and create a clear care plan—leaving families with confidence and peace of mind."



JESSICA BROWNFIELD, DVM, ACUTE PET BELLEVUE MANAGING VETERINARIAN

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"We aim to be the calm in the uncertainty—the steady presence in a stressful situation, and advocates for every pet's comfort and health." - Lindsey Stewart, Practice Manager (pictured: front left)

This is what sets urgent care apart. Our teams meet families in moments of uncertainty—showing up in a way that **earns immediate trust** and helps them move forward with clarity and confidence.

As one team member put it, "I get to help pets and their families during difficult moments. Being able to provide relief and direction when it matters most—that's why I do this." - Emily I., Veterinary Assistant, AcutePet Bellevue

"Our team isn't just treating symptoms. They answer questions, explain options, and help pet owners feel confident in the next step," Stewart says.

Urgent care works alongside your primary veterinarian and local emergency hospitals - never replacing them - ensuring your pet gets timely care when it can't wait.

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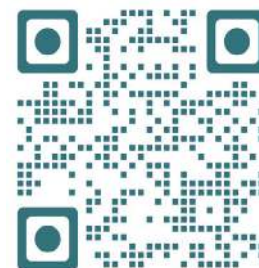
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# Biodiversity: How to Make a Small Wildlife Pond

by: Kira Tackett

There are many ways to turn our homes and gardens into places which foment biodiversity and invite in the Community of Life, which we are part of. One of them is to build a wildlife pond. Birds, insects, amphibians, snails, among others, enjoy it and benefit from it too.

## Number 1

Every pond begins with a hole in the ground. The layering creates different pond zones and habitats, of which the central area is the deepest to help pond dwellers survive the winter. The wooden boards and stones provide structural support at the edges.



## Number 2

A single layer of epdm liner retains the water. Below it a layer of nonwoven underlayment serves as extra protection against stones and roots. Some planning and calculations are needed to select an adequate surface area.



## Number 3

Rocks are distributed around the different zones and layers to create habitat space, internal divisions and solid support for plant soil.



## Number 4

Muddy soil between the rock sections provides substrate for the various plants.



## Number 5

The pond is enriched by carefully selected local species of water plants depending on their pond zone: A mixture of small and tall plants as well as flowering ones offer a good variety for different species' needs.



## Number 6

Rocks are distributed around the different zones and layers to create habitat space, internal divisions and solid support for plant soil.



## Number 7

Muddy soil between the rock sections provides substrate for the various plants.



## Number 8

Muddy soil between the rock sections provides substrate for the various plants.



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At Pet Nation Lodge we believe pets are more than just animals, they're cherished members of your family. That's why our boarding, daycare, and grooming services are all designed with your pet's comfort, safety, and happiness in mind. Whether you're heading out of town, working long hours, or simply wanting to treat your dog to a day of play with their best friends, we offer premium boarding, daycare, and grooming services tailored to meet your pet's individual needs.

What sets us apart? It starts with our clean, spacious, climate-controlled lodge designed with your pet's safety and comfort in mind. Our dedicated team of trained animal lovers treats every dog and cat with the same care and affection they give their own pets – because here, every guest is family. We also believe that socialization and play are essential to a pet's well-being. That's why we offer large indoor and outdoor play areas, daily exercise, and personalized attention for every pet.

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So why do so many pet owners choose us? Because we're more than a lodge – we're a community built on trust, love, and a passion for pets. Visit us on Loveland Maderia Road and discover why Pet Nation Lodge is the choice for pet care. Your best friend deserves the best.

-Jamie Teeter, General Manager at Pet Nation Lodge



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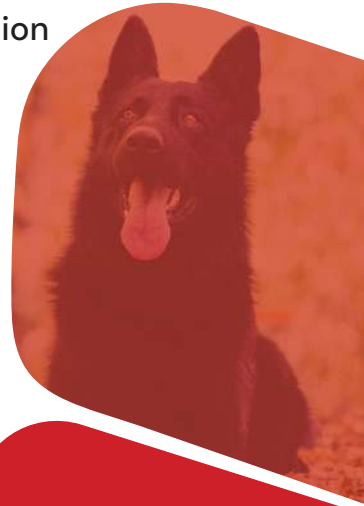
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CINCINNATI PARKS FOUNDATION'S

# oblITTERATORS



by: Kira Tackett

The bond of a daily walk is rooted in simplicity, a shared moment of exploration under the open sky. Yet, that simplicity is increasingly threatened by the debris of modern life, from a mouthful of trash, a paw cut on broken glass, or a nose shoved into something unsafe...and unfortunately, these incidents are becoming more and more difficult to avoid. That is exactly why simply cleaning up after yourself when outside matters, and why programs like oblITTERators are such an essential factor of keeping both parks and pets safer.

The Cincinnati Parks Foundation's oblITTERators program hosts litter cleanups in Cincinnati parks and surrounding greenspaces, working with the City of Cincinnati, Cincinnati Parks, Keep Cincinnati Beautiful, and volunteers to get "hands on" and get litter out of parks. Most events are scheduled on the third Sunday of the month from 12-2 p.m., with locations announced in advance. Volunteers even receive a branded high-visibility T-shirt! The program provides supplies such as litter pickers, trash bags, gloves, and buckets, making it easier (and safer) for these volunteers to help remove hazards from public spaces. For pet owners, that matters more than it may seem at first glance. Litter is ugly above all else, sure, but it can be dangerous; Broken plastic can be chewed, food wrappers can smell irresistible to dogs, aluminum cans can have sharp edges, glass can injure paws; Discarded bones, cigarette butts, fishing line, and random mystery sludge from a tipped cup all bring their own special brand of potential vet visits. While a cleaner park is more aesthetically pleasing on the surface, it is a safer place for animals to walk, sniff, and explore, and for the ecosystem around it to function as well.

The first rule of outdoor pet safety is simple: assume your pet is curious enough to make bad

choices. Dogs investigate with their noses and mouths. Some cats are capable of being trained on a harness, too. Even a well-trained pet may lunge for an interesting smell before you spot the problem.

- Keep your pet on a secure leash, pay attention to what is on the ground, and steer away from areas with visible trash, spilled food, or broken materials.
- It also helps to know what to watch for besides litter. During walks, pets can run into hazards such as standing water, sharp mulch, toxic plants, and dropped human food.
- In warmer weather, pavement can become hot enough to irritate paw pads.

Furthermore, a few habits go a long way:

- Bring water for your pet.
- Watch where they sniff.
- Do a quick paw check after the walk, especially if you passed through gravel, playground edges, or heavily trafficked park areas.
- Practice a strong "leave it" cue so your pet is less likely to sample the sidewalk buffet.
- Carry waste bags and pick up after your own animal.

So the next time you head out for a walk with your pet, think beyond leash and collar. Think about the ground beneath their paws. Cleaner parks mean safer walks, happier pets, and fewer unpleasant surprises. And if you want to help make that happen, Cincinnati already has a program with a great name and an even better mission: oblITTERators!



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## Not all Pets are Furry: Meet Marshmallow The Snake

by: Kira Tackett

While the digital world has its thorns, it also blossoms into a vibrant classroom for the misunderstood - like Marshmallow!

Serving as an ambassador of sorts for his species, Marshmallow belongs to the group of snakes commonly known as hognose snakes, part of the genus Heterodon. Specifically, he is a Snow Western Hognose snake (*Heterodon nasicus*), giving him the iconic white/cream coloration in ode to his name, along with the distinctive, porcine tilt of his snout. Far from just a quirky feature, this 'hognose' is a specialized tool, acting as a natural trowel used to navigate their substrate.

Through platforms like Instagram and Tik-Tok, Marshmallow and his owner, Valentine, have built a following by simply... being himself! Curious, expressive, and often caught mid-yawn or mid-"dramatic flop," he embodies everything people don't expect from a snake. Viewers regularly comment that watching Marshmallow changed their perception of snakes entirely. In fact, posts from his account frequently highlight messages from followers saying he helped them overcome lifelong fears! Snakes are among the most commonly feared animals worldwide; known as ophidiophobia, is often rooted in evolutionary caution, but it's amplified by media portrayals and lack of exposure. According to BBC Wildlife:

- Out of roughly 3,500 to 4,000 known snake species worldwide, only about 600-725 are venomous.
- And of those venomous species, only about 200-250 (roughly 5-7% of all snake species) possess venom potent enough to be dangerous or lethal to humans.

Hognoses of which are a species definitely possessing neither of these traits!

Here's where things get interesting. There is a persistent myth that reptiles are incapable of bonding with humans. That's not entirely true. While they don't necessarily bond the same way mammals do, science still shows something more nuanced. Conducted by Anthrozoös, a 2022 study on the human-reptile bond found that reptile owners frequently describe feelings of affection, companionship, and even love toward their animals, with many considering them family

members. So what does that mean in practice?

Snakes form what is known as 'associative bonds', not emotional attachments in the mammalian sense. They learn:

- Who feeds them
- Who handles them safely
- What environments feel secure



Over time, a snake can become accustomed to its owner, showing reduced stress, calmer behavior, and even a preference for familiar handling routines.

Furthermore, snakes play critical ecological roles, particularly in controlling rodent populations and maintaining balance in food webs. Yet they are frequently persecuted due to fear mongering and misinformation. What makes Marshmallow especially effective is that the education doesn't feel like a lecture. Rather, it's woven into entertainment. As viewers watch his antics from the safety of their screens, the myth of the 'aggressive serpent' evaporates and instead, they see a little charismatic creature that prefers a dramatic bluff over a bite. It is a testament to the power of creators like Valentine that a small snake may stand on a digital pedestal to advocate for his species. Even without formal explanation, exposure alone builds understanding...and that is often the first step toward conservation awareness.



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