Identification of Common Exotic Species

Course 106
Module 2
Anytime a client is thinking about obtaining an exotic pet, you should stress to them that they need to read as much as possible about the type of animal they are considering and talk to people that own those types of animals before making the purchase. Some of the exotic pets seen in clinics today are not expensive to purchase, but they have certain requirements that may become costly. Special housing and feeding requirements need to be addressed immediately. If someone wants an iguana, but does not have the space available to house a large aquarium that is appropriate for a six-foot adult, they should definitely rethink their decision. Some exotics require specific heating and lighting. This all needs to be considered before ever bringing the animal home. They should also learn what diseases commonly affect that animal. Some of the exotics can carry salmonellosis, while others may carry Clostridium tetani. Also, have the owners bring the animal into the clinic in its living environment if at all possible. That way the veterinarian can find out if it is living in the appropriate size cage and they can see if it is cleaned regularly. Tell the owners not to clean the cages before they come, particularly with birds. The veterinarian definitely needs to see feces (color, consistency, quantity, etc.) For more information about a number of exotic animals, look on the internet at www.wingers.com. They have a two-book package called “Exotic Companion Medicine Handbook” that is highly recommended.
Mammals
Rabbits

There are also a number of breeds of rabbits. Some are very small whereas others are very large. The ears can be short or long and can stand up or fold over. Usually walk by hopping, but are capable of fast bursts of speed when chased. The lifespan is approximately 5-10 years.
Ferrets

Ferrets have oval-shaped heads with 40 teeth. They have short necks and long bodies. They are the most closely related to dogs and cats of any of the exotics seen in private practice, although their closest relatives are otters, skunks, and weasels. The average lifespan is six to eight years. Male ferrets usually weigh between three to five pounds and are about 16 inches, whereas females typically are around three pounds and are usually 14 inches. They are available in a wide variety of colors. It is important that ferrets be neutered. In the past, it was common to de-scent them. It is now known that the musky odor is not from the anal sacs, but from the skin. Unspayed females are prone to aplastic anemia and unneutered males can be aggressive. Ferrets should have bright, clear eyes, long whiskers, and a soft coat. They are very curious which can lead them to get in trouble. In the larger breeding facilities, they usually tattoo their ferrets with dots in the ears.
Pot-bellied Pigs

Pot-bellied Pigs have become a popular exotic pet over the years. They have dark eyes and straight tails. They are found in black, black with patches of white, or if there is white hair over black skin, it can appear gray. A pot-bellied pig can weigh between 35-150 pounds, although for the Vietnamese potbelly, the most it should weigh is 95 pounds. The lifespan is 15-25 years.
Hedgehogs

Of the species of hedgehogs that exist, the one typically seen in clinics is the African pygmy hedgehog. It is a small creature that usually measures six inches and weighs about a pound. Hedgehogs have long, thin snouts and short ears and legs. They have spines on their back, like a porcupine, that they will raise when distressed. The lifespan for a well cared-for hedgehog is 8-10 years.
Rodents are labeled as such due to their having upper and lower incisors that grow throughout their life. This is a common problem you may see in your clinic. If the incisors are not worn down properly, an overgrowth can occur and cause injury. This is why rodents tend to gnaw on anything available. It wears down those teeth.
Chinchillas

Chinchillas are closely related to guinea pigs. They have compact bodies, bushy tails, large eyes and ears, and long whiskers. They can weigh between 450-800g with females typically being larger than males. They were originally seen only in shades of gray but with breeding being done to select for other colors, they are now seen in white, black, beige, brown, silver, violet, and multi-colored. Their lifespan is around 20 years in optimum conditions.
Today, there are numerous varieties of rats. Most rats have long, pointed noses with round ears, a plump body, and a long, tapering tail. The average adult weight for a rat ranges from 450-520g for males and 250-300g for females. The normal lifespan is one to three and a half years.
Mice

As with the rats, mice are also available in many different colors. The main difference between a mouse and a rat is that the rat has more scales on its tail than the mouse does. Size is also a fairly good indicator, although there are types of rats that are smaller than certain types of mice. The average adult weight for a mouse ranges from 20-40g for males and 25-40g for females. The normal lifespan is one to three years.
Gerbils

The most common of the 80 species of gerbils seen in clinics is the Mongolian Gerbil. The average adult weight for a gerbil ranges from 80-110g for males and 70-100g for females and they can be two to nine inches in length. The tail, which is covered in hair, can account for almost half the length. They have large eyes that are usually black, but can sometimes be brown. They can be found in a variety of colors ranging from shades of brown to gray or yellow. Gerbils have long back legs and have been known to out run a cat. The normal lifespan is two to five years.
Hamsters

The most common of the hamster species is the golden hamster. The average adult weight for a hamster ranges from 85-130g for males and 95-50g for females. The normal lifespan is two to three years. They can be found in a number of color variations. The obvious difference between a hamster and a gerbil is that the hamsters have very short tails and hamsters have cheek pouches.
Guinea Pigs

Guinea pigs are large rodents that have broad heads and round hindquarters. The average length is around 10 inches long. They have short legs and there are four toes on the front feet and three on the back. There is no visible tail. As with many other species, guinea pigs are found in a number of different breeds. The English guinea pig is smooth-coated, whereas the Abyssinian is rough-coated with rosettes. The Peruvian guinea pig has long hair that is silky. The American has a short, smooth coat. These are only a few of the many different breeds that can be found in the shows. They can be found in a multitude of color variations also. Some are solid colored while others may be tortoiseshell. The eyes can also be different colors. Some have very dark eyes whereas others have pink eyes. The average adult weight for a guinea pig ranges from two and a half to three pounds. The normal lifespan is four to eight years.
Prairie Dogs

Prairie dogs are being seen more and more in animal clinics. They require a lot of attention and like to dig. Their lifespan is approximately 10 years. They can weigh up to five pounds and have short tails. They are not agile, so owners must be aware of the animal’s whereabouts. They have been known to carry hantavirus and bubonic plague, both of which are zoonotic diseases. Many prairie dogs seen in clinics are obese, so owners need to be educated on nutritional requirements.
Avian

There are many different types of birds in the world today. In private practices the two most common orders of birds seen are passeriformes and psittaciformes. The differences between the two orders are physical characteristics. The passerines have straight beaks and their feet are divided so that three toes are on the front of the foot and one is on the back. The psittacines have curved beaks and they have two toes on the front of the foot and two on the back.
Canaries

These small birds are probably the second-most popular of caged birds. They are approximately five and a half inches long and are known for their singing, although only the males sing. Also, the quality of the singing is dependent to a certain degree on the breed of canary. They are available in a variety of colors. With good care, their lifespan is usually six to 16 years.
Finches

Finches are small, four and a half-inch-long birds. There are hundreds of species. They range in color from gray, tan, cream and buff and they have short, red bills. The breast of the bird is white and they have black tails. Male finches have cheeks the color of chestnut and their breasts are black and white striped.
Psittacines
**Parakeets**

Parakeets are the most popular of caged birds. There are several species of parakeets, but the one commonly owned as a pet is known as a budgie. Today, the budgie is available in numerous colors including white, green, blue, and yellow. They typically have black stripes across their heads and backs and long tail feathers. They can live for 15-20 years with proper care. In this particular species, the male and female do not look different other than a few color variations. The male has a blue cere, which is the fleshy area above the beak, and the feet are blue/grey while the female has a pinkish brown cere and her feet are a shade of pink. Parakeets are considered a small bird; they tend to be approximately six to seven and a half inches.
Parrots

Parrots are a medium bird with the average size being 15 inches. There are no external physical differences between the male and female. The most common parrots seen are the Amazon and the African Gray. The lifespan for Amazon parrots can be 30-50 years with some living much longer. They are usually green with yellow on the head. They have a short tail that is multi-colored. It can have black, red, and green in it and there may be blue on the wings. The African parrot is called the African gray. They have a solid red tail and a blue/grey body and head. The bill is black. Its popularity is due to its ability to mimic.
Cockatoos

Many people are familiar with the cockatoo because they have been seen frequently on television. The old detective show “Barretta” had a cockatoo that was popular with the viewing audience. The cockatoo is a medium-sized bird, commonly being 17-18 inches in length. They are usually white or extremely faint pastel colors, although certain species can be black. They have short tails like a parrot, but they have large crests on their heads. The crest can be long or short and can be a variety of colors. There is one species where the crest is red, yellow and white.
Cockatiels

Cockatiels are popular household birds. It is a medium-sized bird that measures about 12 inches long. It has a long tail and pointed crest on its head. It is usually light gray. The males have yellow faces and orange cheeks, while the females have just a touch of yellow on their faces and the cheeks are not nearly as bright in color as the males.
Macaws can range in size from small to very large. They can be 12-36 inches (three feet) with a long, pointed tail that can account for up to half of the overall length. There are several different species and breeding the different species will not result in young. The four main species of large macaws are the hyacinthine macaw, the blue and gold macaw, the scarlet macaw, and the military macaw. The Hyacinth macaw is deep blue with a huge black bill. The blue and gold macaw is blue with yellow underneath, green on the head, white on the face, and a black bill and feet. By comparison, the scarlet macaw is scarlet red and has a little yellow and blue on it and the military macaw has a red forehead and the rest of the bird is olive green. Mini macaws include the yellow-collared, red-shouldered, and severe. The yellow collared macaw is usually 16 inches in length. Its main color is green, but it does have blue on the tail and wings and has a characteristic yellow ring around its neck. The red-shouldered macaw is also known as the noble macaw. It is smaller, ranging from 12-14 inches. Its main color is also green, but it has bright red areas at the shoulders and underneath the wings. The severe macaw is measures 19 inches and is a deep green with red on the shoulders. It has a tuft of brown feathers on the forehead. Macaws require a lot of attention. They are not good pets for people who are gone from home 10 hours a day. Owners need to take this into consideration when deciding on the type of bird they wish to purchase. The mini macaws are much more suited to the typical lifestyle that people lead today than the larger macaws.
Iguana

Iguanas are large lizards that have become more popular as pets through the years. They should be alert and active. If it appears to be dull in color or have a blue, gray, or yellow tint, or if it is thin or lethargic, it is sick. As an iguana matures, its color may change to a gray-green. This is typical for an iguana that has reached three feet or more. When it hatches, it is usually about seven to 12 inches long, but when it reaches adulthood, it may be six feet long, with the tail accounting for more than half of the length. This tail can be used for defense and if an iguana gets upset, you need to watch out for the tail. The life span for an iguana ranges from 10-15 years.
Other Lizards

Carnivorous lizards are becoming increasingly popular as pets and particularly hazardous to the veterinary health care team. Bites are highly septic and can cause nasty wounds and disease conditions. Monitor lizards are the most common species. Special handling may be required and great care taken to avoid human injury.
Snakes

There are many different species of snakes in Texas, whether they are found in the wild or are purchased as pets through local pet stores. It is important for you to be able to identify what species in your area are poisonous. There have been cases where a client brought a snake they have found into the clinic and it turned out to be poisonous. Never put your hand into a box or other holding unit without first knowing exactly what is inside. There are excellent books on the market that have color photos of poisonous and non-poisonous snakes commonly found in Texas. Visiting a local herpetologist or going to the zoo is an even better resource if it is available. Pictures don’t always make the differences clear. Also, some of the non-venomous varieties, including the hognose, are available in several different colors and patterns. One hognose may look like a copperhead, whereas the next may look more like a cottonmouth. The common pet snakes are boa constrictors and pythons. There are different types of boas and pythons. Constrictor is the common boa. It can grow to be six to 10 feet long. It is typically gray, silver or tan with a dark pattern down the body. Python regius, also known as the ball python, is commonly being seen in clinics. As babies, ball pythons are about one foot long. They can grow to reach four to six feet as adults and can live for 20-30 years.
Turtles

There are numerous species of turtles in the world and within the turtle world there are many sizes, shell shapes and patterns, and color variations. Some turtles live on land and they are known also as tortoises. It is important for an owner to know the species they have. Some types of turtles are on the endangered species list and it is not legal for them to be kept as pets. In the proper conditions, a turtle can live for up to 60 years. The box turtle is commonly kept as a pet. They are considered adults when they are four to six years old and are usually five to seven inches in diameter.
Amphibians
Frogs and Fish

Frogs
It should be no surprise that there is a large variety of frogs and that the size and color is dependent on the variety.

Fish
It is rare that you will have someone bring in a fish for treatment, but it can happen. Some of the more common types of fish people have in their aquariums are goldfish, butterfly fish, algae eaters, certain types of catfish, and Siamese fighting fish.