



A Ferret or Fluffy?

5 questions to ask before you invest in a pet

BY LINDSY VAN GELDER

Part of the joy of having pets is that they give us unconditional love, but the wrong one can be a heart-breaker. Just ask the sedentary type whose new greyhound puppy is anything but a kennel potato or the neatness freak whose living room is upholstered in Persian cat hair. Whether you're

thinking about a bunny, a budgie, a Burmese, or a bagel (a basset-beagle mix), give yourself this reality check before you adopt or buy.

■ **Just how close do you want your new "best friend" to be?** Some breeds are happiest in your lap (RagaMuffin cats) or at your feet (Airedale terriers). Boa constrictors don't give a rat's patoot about your constant company (at least beyond your role as banquet caterer), though parrots are miserable without it. "Parrots

PUZZLE PIECES: MASTERFILE; CAT: DIGITAL VISION/CREATAS; FERRET: GK HART/WIKKI HART/PHOTODISC/GETTY IMAGES; RIGHT: IMAGESTATE

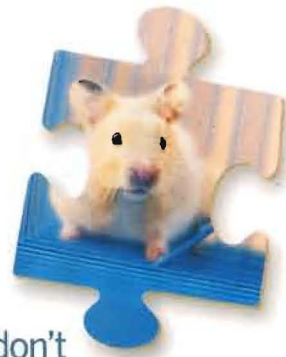
are flock animals...and you're their flock. You need to be *around*," explains Sally Blanchard, author of *The Beak Book*. If you're a workaholic who travels



frequently, instead of getting a feathered friend, consider satisfying your creature fix by volunteering as a dog walker or cat petter at your local animal shelter, says Stephanie Shain, director of outreach for the Humane Society of the United States.

Evaluate your lifestyle, too, she says. "People think they want a certain kind of animal, say one that has lots of energy, like a Labrador or a golden retriever. But if you're the type who likes to come home, sit on the couch, and read the

paper, getting a breed of dog that doesn't require a lot of exercise or even a cat is a much better idea."



“Boa constrictors don't need your constant company, but parrots require it”

■ **Are you ready to redecorate?** A grown cat probably won't look at your drapes and imagine himself as Sir Edmund Hillary, although most kittens will. Size also matters: A bird or a cat can live in a studio apartment with no yard, but a big dog will probably suffer. For prospective ferret owners, the operative factor isn't the size of the house, but how small its hidey-holes are. Most ferrets can fit into any 2-by-2-inch space, says Mary McCarty-Houser, vice president of the American Ferret Association. "They're burrowing animals, and they get inside couches," she explains. The springy innards of recliners are especially lethal because the ferret can be crushed when you change positions. If you're not willing to trade your convertible sofa for a futon (among other ferret-proofing measures), this is not the pet for you.

■ **Are you really looking for a four-footed Mercedes?** Purebred animals have snob

DOG: FOUR LEGS/ENVISION; HAMSTER: T. OZONAS/MASTERFILE; RABBIT: CREATAS

appeal and the advantage of predictability in terms of personality traits, but they can be pricey and have more inherited health issues than mutts do. An increasingly popular middle-ground option in the dog world is the deliberately bred hybrid: schnoodles (a

“Check out how big the iguana will get, how long the parrot will live”

schnauzer-poodle mix), Labradoodles, Yorkiepoos, and more. These mixes don't carry the double recessive genes that cause problems, but the American Kennel Club doesn't recognize them as breeds either, so a hybrid is *not* a good choice for someone who wants a well-established breed.

■ Have you gazed into your crystal ball?

Check out how big the iguana will get, how much the Great Dane will eat, how often the cat needs brushing, and

whether the bird will outlive you. (A domesticated parrot's life expectancy is 40 to 60 years, so if you acquire one as an adult, you'll have to provide for the bird's care in your will.)

■ Are you ready for better and for worse?

One of the most rewarding ways to become a pet owner is to take in a stray, but these animals often have troubled histories.



“I had no idea of what the commitment involved,” says Debra Marshall of Millburn, NJ, owner of Milo, a full-grown shepherd-Lab mix who had spent many months living in a cage at the pound. “He cowered, he ‘made’ in the house, and when I was away, he went nuts and broke everything in the kitchen,” says Marshall. “I thought it was spite, although I realize in retrospect that it was nerves.” It took 3 months for Milo to get over whatever fears had kept him from feeling secure in his new home, but today he's on the Happy Endings board on the Jersey Animal Coalition's Web site.

Lindsay Van Gelder is a freelance writer based in Florida.

Pup containment—indoors and out

Now there's an easy way to keep your dog from digging through the kitchen trash or chasing cars. Innotek's UltraSmart In-Ground Pet Fencing System and Zones Pet-Proof Barrier has a new lightweight collar and works indoors and out. Place the Zones device in off-limits areas. If Rover ventures near, it emits a series of doggie-audible beeps. If he doesn't move away quickly, he'll get a harmless shock. Ditto when he approaches the fencing system outdoors (\$350 for both from www.innotek.net). —Tanya Beers

