

Wild In the Streets



JOHN ROCA DAILY NEWS

From snakes to alligators, exotic pets are being sprung on an unwary city by exasperated owners

By LYNN M. ERMANN

Sighting No. 1: Two wild boars charge down a street in Queens.

Sighting No. 2: Two wild boars charge down a street on Staten Island.

Sighting No. 3: Several people are fishing on a quiet lake in a Queens park when an alligator swims by.

Sighting No. 4: A Manhattanite lifts an unusually heavy umbrella off of the sidewalk and finds a 9-foot boa constrictor coiled inside.

It sounds like the stuff of urban legend. (Remember the one about the alligators in the sewers?) But reality is coming closer to the most bizarre tall tales. All the above sightings actually occurred in the past year, as the city officials who captured the animals can confirm. And the sightings indicate a trend. No, animals are not migrating to the city from the rainforest. Before these vagrant animals escaped or were turned loose, they lived in tanks, cages or pens. Apparently, more and more of our neighbors are keeping some pretty strange pets.

Nothing is too rare or bizarre for New York City pet owners, according to the Bronx zoo. Their curatorial departments receive close to 100 calls a week from owners seeking advice on how to

care for their alligators, iguanas, sugar gliders (airborne possums), prairie dogs, leopards, hedgehogs ...

Veterinarians at Manhattan's Animal Medical Center regularly operate on monkeys, ferrets, pigs, birds and rep-



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CRITTER AT LARGE: Mike Reeves' kinkajou monkey (top); Arnold, a Vietnamese black-belly pig (above).

tiles. They have retrieved 31 cents in change from the belly of an iguana, treated a python for toxicity after it swallowed a flea collar (no dog included) and removed a monkey's teeth. Every year, more and stranger animals appear in the waiting room. In the last 10 years, the caseload in wild and exotic animals has quadrupled, according to Dr. Katherine Quesenberry.

And it's happening everywhere, not just in New York City. Stray wild animals have been turning up in cities across the country over the last several years. Southern dreamers all want to raise alligators. Conservative Pennsylvania farmers are breeding reindeer and llamas for an extra buck. The exotic-animal business has become a multi-million-dollar industry.

With so many breeders and such loose regulations in other states, New Yorkers can easily evade stringent laws of the state and city. People can find rare animals through trade publications or on the Internet. The state Department of Environmental Conservation monitors pet stores in our city, but they can't keep track of every neighborhood place. And nothing can stop New Yorkers from buying pets in other states. We can even mail-order pets. Snakes, for example, can survive for days when

confined to small spaces like boxes.

Once in the household, the animal can live undetected by the outside world. Although any animal that is "wild, ferocious, fierce, dangerous or naturally inclined to do harm" is banned from the city by the Department of Health, the office is understaffed and can only respond to complaints.

Mike and Betsy Gimbel made headlines last fall when their six large caimans (crocodilian reptiles) were confiscated. That didn't make news was that the couple had kept the animals in their Brooklyn apartment for more than a decade before anyone noticed.

The Gimbel case is rare — but not because New Yorkers aren't keeping these types of animals. It is rare because most people give up the animals much sooner. Some release them into the streets, as indicated by sightings. Some give the animals to shelters. Mike Hanno, the reptile contact for the ASPCA, takes in six abandoned crocodilians a year, and 12 iguanas a month. Still other animals are confiscated by authorities after the animals injure people.

This past summer, Queens police confiscated a man's pet cougar after it bit his neighbor's 2-year-old.

It is the unfortunate end to a story that almost always starts the same way: "Oh, how cute!" This is what the future owner says when first viewing a baby iguana, snake, alligator, monkey or whatever. The animal is tiny, helpless. The admirer reminisces on years spent watching *National Geographic* specials or *Mutual of Omaha's "Wild Kingdom"* on TV. It is an impulse buy, as much as a puppy or kitten would be, but this one exacts a higher price.

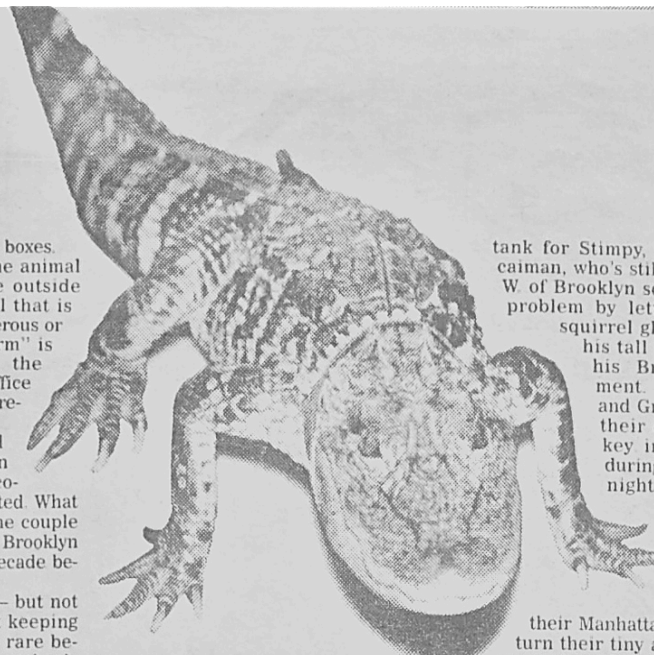
The honeymoon can last a few months or a few years. Monkey owners at a Simian Society meeting coo over their diaper-swaddled monkeys in early spring. By fall, many of the monkeys are in shelters. What happens?

However cute in infancy, many species of wild animals grow into larger, fiercer and totally unmanageable adults. A wild animal's temperament changes with age. It is even possible to catch dangerous diseases from these animals — salmonella from reptiles, rabies from ferrets, as many as 90 different types of diseases from primates. One Simian Society member's pair of Java Macaque infant monkeys have grown into frighteningly large and rowdy adults with razor-sharp teeth and a habit of using them viciously. Even iguanas can become territorial and reach a length of 9 feet. Full-grown female Burmese pythons can reach twice that length. Potbellied pigs are often more than 200 pounds at full size.

"We didn't think it would live this long," says Queens resident John Cade of his large alligator. It started as an adorable little baby and has since grown to an adolescent length of 7 feet — and is still growing.

Keeping such an animal can become a major hassle. Upkeep is costly. Cade's large alligator consumes \$30 of food a day — mice, raw chopped meat, rats, guinea pigs.

Then there is the space problem. New York City housing isn't designed for large animals. Where do you keep an alligator? Cade keeps his in a dug-out, tarp-covered pool at the center of



tank for Stimp, his 4-foot-long caiman, who's still growing. Matt W. of Brooklyn solves the space problem by letting his flying squirrel glide down from his tall bookshelves in his Brooklyn apartment. Vinny Bradley and Greg Martel keep their capuchin monkey in a large cage during the day but at night it is free to swing gleefully

from the doorways or bound across the furniture in their Manhattan pad. They all turn their tiny apartments into tropical jungles or savannas.

Exotic-pet owners basically try to be zookeepers. However dangerous the animals, many are sure they can handle them through self-education and practice. "I love snakes," explains Ed Treutner, who keeps a rabbit-eating 12-foot Burmese python in his Brooklyn apartment. He says it is harmless — if you hold it the right way. It has escaped several times.

The Gimbels were so sure of the good-naturedness of their caimans that they slept with the animals. Owners are committed and passionate and, like the most defensive of parents, convinced that their pets can do no wrong.

So maybe it is shame in their defeat that makes them release the animals silently into the night when they become too much to handle.

And occasionally, we come across their paths. As if living in New York City weren't stressful enough, now we

The 12-foot python is really harmless — as long as you hold it the right way.

a heated garage. It is chained to a stake in the ground. He has a smaller tiger that roams the house freely.

Brooklynite Robert B. (he asked to be anonymous) has built an indoor

How Much Is That Prairie Dog In the Window?

New Yorkers who are considering buying wild or exotic animals should first consult with the Department of Health. While the department has only an incomplete list of animals that are prohibited, and will not release the list to the public, if you call, the department officials will check the list.

Contact:
■ Department of Health Veterinary Services: (212) 566-5850/5851.

I NEED MY CRAWL SPACE: Dunde (above) is a 2½-year-old alligator; Vanessa, a white-faced capuchin monkey (r.), catches up on her reading.

Repatriate That Pesky Rhino

Thousands of former New York City residents have escaped the urban jungle and are now happily lolling about in the countryside. These wild and exotic animals were relocated to wildlife preservation parks after being turned in at city shelters.

Once viewed as the agents of death, the animal control and shelter workers are becoming more like travel agents these days. When an animal is turned into a shelter, workers tap into an extensive listing of zoos and wildlife parks to find it a home.

A small zoo may be looking for a particular type of primate for breeding purposes. There are also wildlife parks and reserves that take in only one type of animal. The Bronx zoo has set up a special park in Florida for abandoned parrots. PIGS (Potbellied pigs Interest Group and Shelter) in West Virginia takes in abandoned pigs. (That's where the four wild boars ended up.)

Surprisingly, exotics may actually fare better than domestic animals. Only the ill or rabid ones are put to sleep. If only there were as many refuges for abandoned cats and dogs!

Contact:
■ American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals: (212) 876-7700.
■ Centers for Animal Care and Control: (212) 442-2073.

have to worry about rabid ferrets and marauding marmosets. Was that a clothesline that fell on the fire escape or a Burmese python?

Where is Fifi, anyway?

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