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Amy Ma

A niche pet owner

round eyes that melted his heart.

But the love affair was shattered once he brought a sugar glider home.

“It was a very stinky animal,” he said. “My home was filled with the odor of its urine and feces for months. The animal died when winter came. The Internet didn’t tell me that sugar gliders are such difficult pets.”

Jin Xin, a professional breeder of sugar gliders, said that Birmingham made several mistakes.

“The sugar glider can survive only in temperatures above 18 degrees Celsius, while in Shanghai, the average temperature in winter is 4 to 12 degrees,” Jin said. “Now even in summer, I cover them with thick blankets if we have air conditioning running indoors.”

As for the stink, Jin said he suspects that Birmingham bought a male glider, which has a scent gland that reeks during mating seasons.

In their natural habitat, sugar gliders live communally in large family groups in trees. They are nocturnal mammals, with sharp claws used to “glide” from tree to tree. A human home is a far cry from its native environment.

“The moral of the story is that we should always have sufficient knowledge before raising a new pet,” Birmingham concluded.

White-collar worker Amy Ma is a niche pet owner who prefers cold-blooded animals. She said she knows how much damage the Internet can do to such pets, so she never reveals anything about her “precious babies” online.

“Many types of cold-blooded pets are not very newbie-friendly and raising them unscientifically is often fatal to the animals,” she said. “I’ve heard of a lot that people who have no experience in raising reptiles and buy frogs or lizards on impulse. They don’t bother to learn to create a livable environment for



A baby sugar glider. — Lu Feiran

them, and the animals just die within days. We want to avoid such tragedies as much as possible.”

Ma has been raising cold-blooded pets for seven years. Allergic to the fur of cats and dogs, she raised a central bearded dragon as a pet.

Her pet family has grown to include an Australian green tree frog, several caramel pink albino slider turtles and gecko lizards.

“With cold-blooded creatures living at home, you need to pay attention to the humidity and temperature indoors,” she explained. “Take the Australian green tree frog, for example. If the temperature in the tank is 28 degrees Celsius, while the indoor temperature is 23 degrees, it might catch a stomach disease by just emerging from the water for several minutes.”

Ma and fellow cold-blooded pet aficionados communicate with each other by phone. They exchange tips and sometimes buy newborns from one another.

“Social media is a double-edged sword for pets,” she said. “It draws attention to unusual animals but also opens the door to potential damage. There will always be irresponsible pet owners.”

That’s true. Irresponsible pet owners are a continuing problem in Shanghai.

Last year, several Arctic foxes were spotted in the city. One of them sneaked into the subway. All were eventually captured and sent to Shanghai Zoo, where officials said they suspected the foxes were abandoned pets.

“Most of the Arctic foxes in our zoo are abandoned pets,” the zoo said on its official WeChat account. “Foxes are nocturnal animals and love to burrow, so that they are not ideal city pets. We always advise people not to raise animals on impulse. And if you already have one, don’t abandon it.”

Feeling lonely? When people do, they often acquire pets

Li Qian

PEOPLE who live alone often raise a pet for companionship. With solo lifestyles increasing among both the young and old, the domestic pet market is thriving, a recent survey found.

The survey by iiMedia Research found that the market for pets has quadrupled in the last few years, soaring from 97.8 billion yuan (US\$14.6 billion) in 2015 to 394.2 billion yuan in 2021.

The rising trend is expected to continue, the survey said, with the market value jumping to 493.6

billion yuan by the end of this year and to 811.4 billion yuan in 2025.

The major consumers in this market are young singles and older people whose children have left home.

According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, China’s single population reached 240 million in 2018, meaning that almost one in six people was single, and 77 million were living alone.

The ministry has forecast that the number will grow to 92 million this year, amid declining marriage registrations that hit an all-time low of 7.6 million couples in 2021.

Meanwhile, data showed an estimated 100 million older “empty-nesters” in China, encompassing nearly a third of the country’s population of people 60 years and older.

Living alone or feeling lonely is an impetus to get a pet, according to the iiMedia Research survey.

Compared with developed countries, China’s pet industry is still in its infancy. However, its more recent rapid expansion has created new niche markets, such as pet food, the survey found.

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A baby angora ferret. — Ti Gong