

# Welcome to Hamsterdam

For hamster lovers, good things come in small packages

by RUTHANNE JOHNSON

**Ask Justin Walker** about hamsters, and the Lodi, N.J., trial lawyer will launch into an enthusiastic description of his pets' personalities.

Panda is the obsessive organizer, carefully separating her food caches. "One side will be nuts, and the other side will be treats," says Walker, who carefully replaces the piles after cage cleanings. Snowflake is the bold one who paws at his owners when he wants to be held, and the family glutton who devours everything in his bowl as if it's his last meal. The last to rise, Snuffler "runs like a madman" on his wheel all night, while Runty is the quiet observer. "He'll poke up from his bedding like a prairie dog and just watch you," Walker says. And there's the demanding Baby Hammie, who chews loudly on her water bottle when she wants playtime. "They have trained us well," Walker admits with a laugh.

Like many hamster aficionados, Walker is charmed by his pets' antics. But as a volunteer with North Jersey Guinea Pig and Hamster Rescue, Walker also sees the heartbreaking side of hamsters in the pet trade. Snowflake was found in a dumpster, bleeding from an injured leg. "He must have had a day or two of hell," Walker says. Snuffler and the pregnant Panda were abandoned in a supermarket parking lot; Runty and Baby Hammie came from the litter of 16 that quickly followed.

Carla Holusha founded the rescue in 2005 after her husband saved a baby guinea pig from a storm drain—"the first time we realized that people would dispose of pocket pets," she says. Most of the group's rescues are the result of incorrectly sexed hamsters being housed together. With gestation periods of just weeks and large litter sizes, two hamsters can quickly multiply into dozens; Holusha has received calls from people wanting to surrender up to 50 unplanned pets.

While providing a safety net for homeless small animals, the North Jersey group and similar organizations around the country work to educate people about species too often viewed as replaceable "starter pets." Hamsters don't need to be walked every day or taken to the vet for shots, but that doesn't mean they're easy to care for, says Angela Gross with the Maryland-based Small Angels Rescue. Small, barren cages can lead to boredom and frustration for these naturally curious critters. Lack of opportunity to exercise, incorrect diet, or the wrong



## Chinese

A slender mouse-like hamster, the Chinese hamster lives 2½ to 3 years on average.

## Roborovski

With fur patches resembling eyebrows, the roborovski is the smallest domesticated hamster species.



## Syrian

Expandable cheek pouches allow Syrian hamsters to store up to half their body weight in food.

## Dwarf

Furry-footed dwarf hamsters often enjoy living with a same-gender buddy or two, if together since birth.



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bedding material can cause sickness or misery. Rough or improper handling can also lead to nipping issues—one of the main reasons children lose interest in their hamster, Holusha says.

But if parents supervise and train their children in proper care and handling, hamsters can make great family pets, as Anna Peterson discovered last year when she and her daughters adopted three hamsters from Small Angels Rescue. At first, Peterson watched over the feeding, handling, and cage cleaning. Now, every Saturday morning, before they ride their bikes or play with friends, 12-year-old RayLee and 10-year-old Allie clean their hamsters' cages and check them for signs of illness. Allie builds Moses a treat-filled play kingdom from cardboard boxes, while Oreo has become so sociable she'll place her paws on the cage glass to be picked up, then sit calmly in RayLee's hands. "My girls are very proud of the care they provide for their hamsters," Peterson says. "They are proud of the fact that our hamsters are healthy, happy, and well-adjusted."

No matter how good the care, a hamster's 2- to 3-year average lifespan can seem painfully short. The Peterson family mourned the recent deaths of two of their adopted hammies, but they also saw it as an opportunity to help another hammy in need.

Walker has a similar attitude. "For their short lives here, we give them happiness and love them as much as we can," he says. "They give us love, too."



## Shiny, Happy Hammies

### Follow these tips for providing your hamster with top-notch care

**1 Pick of the Litter** Rather than perpetuate the cruelties of breeding mills, adopt your hamsters from rescues or shelters. An experienced shelter employee or rescuer can correctly identify gender and provide advice on handling, caging, diet, and local small mammal veterinarians.

**2 On Burrowed Time** In the wild, a hamster burrow has many chambers and can be several feet underground. Cages sold in pet stores are often too small or don't provide proper ventilation. Cages should be single level and at least 24-by-18 inches (bigger is always better); many hamster enthusiasts build their own from oversized storage bins. Place the cage in a temperature-controlled, draft-free room and fill with a layer of recycled wood pulp bedding or finely flaked aspen chips (don't use cedar, cat litter, or treated pine). For nesting material, simply tear toilet paper into strips. Keep in mind that Syrians are territorial and must be housed separately. Other species may live in family groups of the same sex, but be prepared to put them in separate cages if fighting occurs.

**3 Ham I Am** Hamsters are nocturnal, traveling up to 12 miles a night in the wild. For pet hamsters, variety and exercise are necessary for physical and mental health. A solid-surfaced exercise wheel (for Syrians, at least 8 inches in diameter) is a must; avoid wheels with rungs, which can cause injuries. Place paper towel tubes, small blocks of untreated wood, large diameter PVC piping, empty tissue boxes, ceramic dishes with chinchilla sand, and other hamster-safe toys in the enclosure, and rotate to keep life interesting. Daily playtime outside the cage—in a large storage container filled with toys—will also help prevent boredom.

**4 Hamming It Up** Hamsters eat a variety of foods—from nuts, seeds, and grains to produce and even tofu. They can stuff their expandable cheek pouches with food and nesting materials (a trait that earned Syrian hamsters, one of several domesticated species, the name "Mister Saddlebags" in their native land). Augment a quality hamster mix with fresh, hamster-safe veggies and occasional servings of fruit (the diabetes-prone dwarf species should avoid the latter). Hamsters also enjoy special treats such as unsalted nuts, cooked whole wheat pasta, or rolled oats. To avoid serving items that may make them sick, keep an approved food list on the fridge.

**5 Hammy Handling** To avoid a nip, don't grab a sleeping hammy, and wash your hands to remove any food smells. Gently scoop up your hamster with both hands, or coax her into a cup or other container (supervise young children to prevent mishaps). Regular handling socializes your pet and allows you to check for masses, nasal discharge, dull eyes, or other signs of illness.

➤ **TO LEARN MORE** about hamster handling, water bottle and cage selection, and feeding, and to watch a video on hamster care, go to [humansociety.org/allanimals](http://humansociety.org/allanimals).