

## **The Good Life with Hayden**

by Stephen E. Brown

In the universe of pets, sometimes the smaller animals are overlooked by potential adopters. All pets have something unique to give, and we do ourselves a disservice if we miss out on the enjoyment that nature's littlest critters can add to our homes and lives.

At my house, we have both larger and smaller pets. My little fellow's name is Hayden, and he is an energetic and friendly little nutmeg gerbil. I enjoy watching him do life's simple things. He plays, he works, he eats, he observes, he runs, and he rests. The more I watch him, the more his behaviors interest me and invite me to understand the world from his unique perspective.

Obviously, owning a small pet isn't quite like owning a dog or cat. The behaviors, needs, bonds, and problems of smaller animals will differ considerably. What they do have in common with their larger counterparts though, is a need for a caring and safe environment in which to thrive. The gerbil is a comparatively low maintenance pet, but make no mistake – they require owner responsibility as any other pet does. Proper nutrition and pen cleaning are an absolute must. Beyond these basics, gerbils like company. Ideally, they are paired when very young so that they have the companionship they need. Opposite sex pairings are for breeding purposes; same sex gerbils are paired (when very young) for friendship. Because my gerbil was not paired, I try to give him some extra attention and stimulation by taking him from his pen and interacting with him on a daily basis. Hayden enjoys being held in my open hand, and he likes a very gentle stroke on his head or back with soft conversation accompanying it.

Most every night, Hayden takes a stroll – more like a dash really – around my easy chair, constantly finding new ways to explore the relatively expansive domain that is the living room. I talk to him in a near whisper, as the hearing of a gerbil is very sensitive. A normal human voice at close range would sound like the loudest thunder to him.

Generally, gerbils and other smaller creatures aren't openly affectionate with their owners as a more traditional larger pet might be, but gerbils do form bonds with humans in their own interesting ways. They are creatures of habit and instinct. Hayden knows when he is about to be fed, as I make the same sounds and motions each time I feed him. He associates the sounds with food and comes out of his burrow to meet me without fail. He enjoys learning simple tricks. Just watching him move about and respond to the sounds around him is entertaining. Gerbils are inquisitive but shy creatures. They are non-violent, but they will show you their displeasure with a plaintive squeak if frightened or mishandled. Always handle your gerbil with care, and never try to physically force the animal to move (or not move).

Hayden, like most gerbils, is a clean and safe pet (despite some recent reports to the contrary). If your gerbil is healthy when acquired, and if you keep the cage clean, you can expect your little guy to stay clean and healthy. Avoid using spray chemicals, such as window or counter-top cleaners around your gerbil! Ammonia and a host of others ingredients are

potentially harmful or even fatal to these small animals. Clean the gerbil's cage and utensils with just plain water and dry with a clean towel. Remember too, that a sick or injured gerbil should be given prompt veterinary care just like any other pet.

Hayden is a tireless worker. He constantly arranges and rearranges the bedding in his pen, piling it first in one area then another. As gerbils are nocturnal, Hayden works the night shift! Your gerbil will probably sleep during the morning because he's been up all night. They are burrowers, so be sure to provide enough bedding materials for him to build a suitable "cavern." When the gerbil is sleeping or resting in the burrow, leave him alone! How cheery are you if aroused from a sound sleep? If roused, a gerbil might briefly display a grouchy attitude, but with a little common sense from the owner, this need not occur.

Gerbil diet and exercise requirements are easy enough. Hayden likes to chew on the pieces of soft pine or paper tubes that I provide, and he plays endlessly on his exercise wheel. He likes bits of bread, lettuce, celery greens, peanuts, cheese, and bread. Fresh water and an assortment of seeds complete his basic diet. He gets periodic vitamin chews as well.

The expense associated with keeping a pet gerbil or other smaller pet are reasonable. You can easily establish a nice home for an adopted gerbil or hamster for under fifty dollars. A suitable cage is important. Because many small critters like to gnaw, don't use a cardboard box as a home, or you'll be searching for your gerbil in the morning!

A gerbil is a wonderful pet choice so long as you don't need or expect a lot of overt affection from your pet. They are fun to watch and interact with, but they are instinctively wary of humans. Accordingly, they require a fairly long period to get comfortable with such things as sleeping in your shirt pocket or coming toward you when called. Most gerbils never fully overcome their self-protective instinct, and you shouldn't expect that of them. Also, you should carefully consider whether a gerbil or other small critter is an appropriate choice for younger children. In such cases, parents need to supervise the pet care and interaction thoroughly, stressing the relative delicacy of the species and encouraging non-abusive pet-owner attitudes.

Gerbils and other small pets come in many sorts and breeds. Please give these endearing little critters a fair chance to win you over and get to know you, and you too will come to enjoy their antics and their company just as I do.

Hayden sends his regards.

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