

Sugar Gliders: Think Long and Hard Before Falling for This 'Impulse Buy'

Sugar gliders are adorable, small and fuzzy, making them popular impulse buys at state fairs, exotic animal shows and flea markets. But do sugar gliders - marsupials native to Australia - make good pets?

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Sugar gliders are heavily exploited, taken from the wild and passed off as captive-bred or bred in puppy-mill-style facilities
- Sugar gliders are nocturnal, have sharp claws and require a time-consuming specialized diet and regular bonding sessions, all facts that make them more suited to life in the wild than as pets
- Sugar gliders are often sold at state fairs, flea markets and exotic animal shows, where people may purchase these demanding wild animals on a whim
- Do not support people "vending" life at these locations. If you think you can provide the environmental enrichment, housing and unique dietary needs of these exotic animals then rescue one of the hundreds available worldwide through adoption networks

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Sugar gliders are small, tree-dwelling marsupials native to Australia, Tasmania, Indonesia and New Guinea. They belong to the same order as kangaroos, wombats, opossums and Tasmanian devils, and they're nocturnal — this is the first clue that sugar gliders do not make the best pets.

Unfortunately, by the time some new sugar-glider owners realize that their "pocket pet" likes to sleep all day and can become understandably irritated — and nippy — if you disturb him, it's too late.

Add to that the sugar glider's need for rigorous exercise and aerial movement and stimulation during the middle of the night, sharp claws meant for climbing and grasping trees and their complex dietary needs, including fresh fruit, insects and vegetables daily, and it's easy to see why sugar gliders should remain in the forests of Australia, where they typically live with 10 to 15 other sugar gliders, and not in a cage in your living room.

Sugar Gliders Are Heavily Exploited

Sugar gliders in the wild sleep in groups, making them easy targets for people looking to capture and sell them. Trafficking of sugar gliders is common in Indonesia, where wild-caught gliders may be shipped to area breeding farms and sold as captive-bred.

While sugar gliders are not considered a threatened species, they are among the most heavily exploited. Government quotas dictate how many sugar gliders can be taken from the wild each year, but these quotas are often ignored.

In Malaysia, for instance, the quota for one year was 225 sugar gliders but thousands were likely taken. Malaysia and Australia has banned pet ownership of sugar gliders, but in the U.S. their popularity as pets is growing. As reported by One Green Planet:¹

"... [T]hese animals are still gaining popularity as pets around the world, particularly in the United States, where they are bred to be pets. One of the most common sellers of sugar gliders in the U.S. is a company called Pocket Pets.

This traveling company can often be seen selling sugar gliders at malls, festivals, conventions and [state fairs]. In addition, viral images and videos of people with these animals helps perpetuate the problem, by making it seem normal and acceptable to keep wild animals as pets.

Their wide availability and social acceptance is leading these animals to be kept in thousands of households throughout the United States."

Sugar Glider Sellers Depend on Impulse Buys

Sugar gliders are small, soft and furry. They have huge black eyes, tiny hands and feet and long fuzzy tails. In short, they're absolutely adorable, and that's what their sellers depend on. Sugar gliders are often sold as novelty items at state fairs, flea markets and exotic pet shows.

Sadly, many of these animals are bred at breeding facilities similar to puppy mills and are picked up by shoppers on a whim. Sellers may promote how "easy" it is to care for sugar gliders, but they're actually a complex pet to own and require plenty of research and education prior to doing so.

Most people who end up purchasing a sugar glider at a state fair or other entertainment venue had no plans of owning such an animal prior to that point and many find them difficult once they bring them home.

Without proper attention to bonding, for instance, sugar gliders can bite their owners or other people who attempt to handle them.

Sugar gliders have a membrane called a patagium that stretches from their wrist to their ankle that helps them to glide from tree to tree. In the wild, sugar gliders can "fly" (glide) the length of a football field.²

As such, they require a large cage with plenty of room to glide in (ideally a bedroom that has been converted into an exercise area), as well as fleece pouches for sleeping and a special diet (including live insects and worms) with a proper ratio of calcium to phosphorus.

If a sugar glider does not consume enough calcium, he can develop nutritional secondary hyperparathyroidism (NSHP), sometimes known as metabolic bone disease (MBD). In NSHP, the sugar glider's bones never mineralize, which leaves them weak and prone to fractures.³

He may have trouble climbing or walking due to broken bones, but sometimes sugar gliders with NSHP show no symptoms until they fall and become severely injured or paralyzed.

Unfortunately, most people keep their sugar gliders in tiny 4x4-foot cages where they can't "glide," which is the equivalent to raising a human in a small bathroom. People also buy nutritionally inappropriate commercially available "sugar glider food," the equivalent of feeding your kids only cereal their whole lives.

Reasons Not to Get a Sugar Glider as a Pet

Although sugar gliders resemble small pets like guinea pigs and hamsters, they have very different needs and are more demanding pets. As explained by Suggie Savers, a nonprofit sugar glider rescue organization, there are quite a few reasons why sugar gliders do not make the best pets:⁴

"This is not a pet you can place food in a cage for and leave for a weekend. You must spend at least six hours a day with your glider to socialize him or her properly. They need this interaction and can die without it. Stress can kill your glider, as well as illness, malnutrition and dehydration.

A vet with specific knowledge of sugar gliders is required to have on hand and available for emergencies. The food a glider eats can be expensive and does take a while to prepare.

There is fresh fruit and veggies to cut and worms and crickets or boiled chicken to feed. They need to be loved and have a companion to play and snuggle with. Often after the newness wears off the glider is left alone and the person grows tired of all the work involved in caring for such a demanding pet.

If the glider is properly socialized and is already pouch or bra-trained (trained to stay in your bra, pocket or pouch while you go about your daily tasks) it can become aggressive if you don't spend the right amount of time with him every day."

Other reasons to think twice before considering a sugar glider as a pet include:

- It's illegal to own sugar gliders in some U.S. states
- It's difficult to find someone to properly care for a sugar glider if you're going out of town
- It's difficult to find a veterinarian who treats sugar gliders and such care can be expensive
- Sugar gliders throw their food and are messy eaters
- Sugar gliders will urinate on you to mark you with their scent

Abandoned and Unwanted Sugar Gliders Need Good Homes

Since many sugar gliders are obtained as impulse buys, many end up abandoned or unwanted. As a result, sugar glider rescue organizations have popped up across the U.S.

If you have the time, knowledge and resources to provide a good home to these animals, please consider adopting a pair or trio from a reputable rescue organization (since sugar gliders are so social, they do better with a companion or two). Finally, remember that sugar gliders are wild animals that deserve to live their lives in their natural environment, and purchasing these animals supports their exploitation and the often-illegal wildlife trade.

Sources and References

[The State Journal-Register August 19, 2016](#)

¹ [One Green Planet March 14, 2016](#)

² [National Geographic, Sugar Gliders](#)

³ [Arizona Exotics Animal Hospital, Calcium Deficiency in Sugar Gliders](#)

⁴ [SuggieSavers.org](#)
