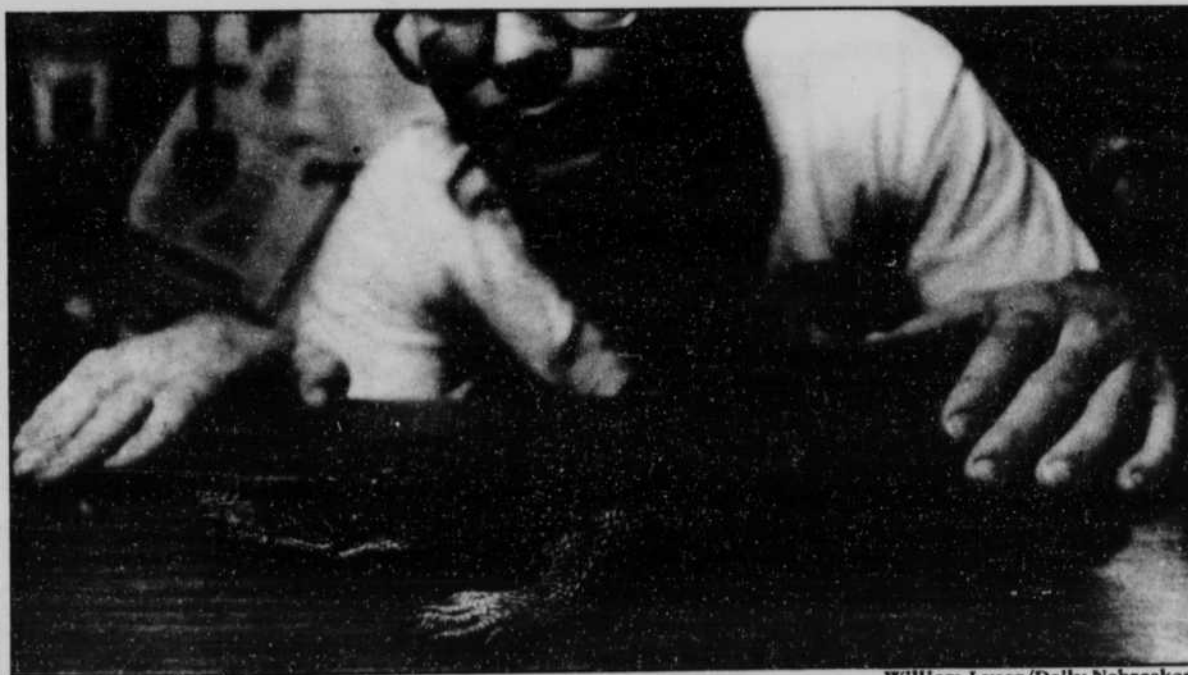


diversion

Local stores house exotic pets



William Lauer/Daily Nebraskan
Bob Schlesiger cuddles a 7-foot boa constrictor. The reptile eats rats, he said.



William Lauer/Daily Nebraskan
A Savannah monitor is easy to take care of says Bob Schlesinger. It lives in an aquarium and eats mice.

By Henry Battistoni
 Staff Reporter

Pet owners need not come home to the old, typical dog or cat. Exotic pets, though often expensive, are readily available in Lincoln.

Most exotic pets offered in Lincoln are exotic birds, reptiles and fish. Unusual insects like tarantulas, scorpions and salt water invertebrates are also available.

Bob Schlesiger of the Pet Ark said, "Any snake can be tamed down easily. People are interested in size these days." He said the Pet Ark receives more requests for ball pythons than any other snakes.

Ball pythons are gentle snakes that roll themselves into a ball when frightened. Boa constrictors also are gentle and are quite curious about their surroundings.

Other reptiles such as iguanas, monitor lizards and tegus are sold in Lincoln. Iguanas stay relatively still making them relatively boring pets. They also tend to be temperamental. Young iguanas eat insects. As they grow older, they become herbivores.

Some monitor lizards reach nine feet in length. They smash their prey before eating it. Monitor lizards can be fed mice.

Frank Fast of the Pet Ark, Belmont Plaza, said the cayman, a South American crocodile, is the most exotic item he sells. He said they grow very quickly and their owners cannot handle them. In that case, he said, the owner will either try to sell the animals back to the store or end up giving them away to a zoo.

Caymans can feed on mice and goldfish. When they grow older they can be fed larger fish like smelt. They cost more than \$100.

Fast said tortoises have been selling well. He said this year he has special ordered six. Customers usually ask for red or yellow footed, hingeback, or leopard tortoises, he said.

Fast's store also carries scorpions and sold five last month. The

scorpions cost around \$30 and live on insects like crickets or cockroaches.

The most popular tarantula among customers is the large bird-eating variety, he said. It costs from \$30 to \$50. Young bird-eating tarantulas eat crickets or wax worms. Older spiders eat pinkie mice or young birds.

Experience is more important than books, so Fast suggests that people start with something simple. He also added that there are no veterinarians trained to work with reptiles in the area.

"Anything not commonly domestically bred is exotic," Ed Luben of the Pet Ark, 3822 Normal Blvd., said.

He said he feels strange calling the birds he works with daily, raises and breeds "exotic."

When buying a bird for a pet, Luben suggests buyers do research to prepare themselves for the animal. He said it is best to buy a bird domestically bred and hand-raised because these birds will be better imprinted on humans.

Luben suggests cockatoos for those buyers that want a bird that will especially enjoy handling, and African gray and Amazon parrots for those who want a bird that talks.

Luben said the prices for exotic birds start at \$100. Cockatoos and Macaws can cost \$1,000 and up.

Jason Dreith of M&T Tropical Fish, 302 S. 19 St., said salt water animals are the most exotic fish. However, some exotic freshwater species are available.

One such freshwater exotic is the freshwater ray. Rays cost nearly \$90. They require a sandy-bottomed tank to hide in. When not hiding they glide gracefully through the water.

A salt-tank environment offers myriad exotic animal possibilities. The problem with salt tanks is that they require a fair amount of attention. To begin with, it takes one or two months to establish the proper bacteria levels and test for nitrate, nitrite levels and salinity levels. Then the one quarter of the tank's water must be changed every month or two. Dreith said most people buy clown fish, trigger fish, damsels, tangs and the less expensive angel fish.

Eels are also a popular item, he said. Eels range in price from \$20 to \$60 according to size and type. They are sturdy animals and eat well.

Sharks are also durable fish. A wide variety can be ordered. Sharks do not get along well with other fish, however. They must be placed with large or tough fish such as big clown triggers. They are interesting when they eat, but otherwise bump around the tank aimlessly.

Octopi are fascinating to watch but have a major drawback -- they only live a couple of months. They must be isolated or the risk exists for an ink-filled tank. At \$30 to \$40 per octopus, they are expensive and extremely temporary enter-

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