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Pet FLYING Squirrels: Who owns whom?



Welcoming a flying squirrel into your home opens the door to a lifelong bond — and treats falling from the ceiling.

BY MIRIAM STEIN

It takes a unique type of person to appreciate a pet jumping on their head. As odd as it may sound, a small population of pet owners finds such interaction nothing short of endearing. The owners of Southern flying squirrels are a species unto themselves, dedicated to their furry pets in a way that can only be described as infatuation.

Beginning The Bond

When obtained at a young age and properly cared for, Southern flying squirrels can grow up tame and friendly, forming strong bonds with their human family. Bonding pouches help familiarize a baby flyer with its human parent, much in the same way pouches are used with sugar gliders.

By carrying a flyer baby in a shirt pocket or pouch for the

first few weeks of ownership, the owner creates a sense of cozy security for the baby. These early weeks of bonding utilize the squirrel's keen senses to weave the human parent's scent, voice and heartbeat into a foundation for a long-lasting relationship. For the human, it is an amazing experience to have a warm fuzzy baby sleeping in your shirt and looking to you for refuge from the world.

Formula feedings are heartwarming experiences. Your flyer will express such love for you since you are giving it such a warm yummy treat. It will put its tiny paws on your fingers and your heart will melt. As it gets older, it will daintily take a piece of pecan from your hands, as if you have just given it the most precious gift. And further melts your heart. If you're lucky, your flyer will enjoy itty-bitty massages and belly rubs that could very well con-



PHOTOS BY MIRIAM STEIN



MIRIAM STEIN

tinue to be appreciated in adulthood.

Shirt bonding, formula feedings and generous handling during infancy create a comfort level for a flying squirrel that withstands the tests of adolescence. As the flying squirrel reaches maturity, it gains confidence in exploring its surroundings. It may run away from its owner, but it will always happily run back. Or jump.

Journey Through Adolescence

Experiencing a flying squirrel coming into its own as an adolescent and young adult can only be described as a joyous time. Flyers can be likened to flying hamsters, with personality traits taken from both puppies and adult cats. They have the mannerisms of hamsters, playful tendencies of puppies and haughty demeanor of cats.

Each flyer has its own unique personality and methods of showing love for its human parent. In its enthusiasm for exploration, a juvenile flyer may run off and find itself scared. Thus begins a cheeping concerto to call for its favorite human to come to the rescue. Other flyers will run off to explore, practically forgetting the existence of a parent, but as soon as it sees you it leaps and practically smothers you in cheek kisses. This happens more often if you put apricot jelly on your cheek.

Some flyers have run-dance routines that tell their mommies they want a treat, formula or need to go potty. Other special flyers can be treat-trained to respond to their name, go potty or fly on command. Learning how smart your little rodent is and how it most enjoys interacting with you can be a festive experience.

Flyers have been likened to toddlers in their eating habits.

Around The House

Flying squirrels need ample cage space but also require out-of-cage time to explore and keep their minds engaged. If you take on flyer parenting, you must play with your flyer for at least one hour every night and let it have some additional free time. This can occur in a tent, an enclosed room or by giving it free rein of your home. Any area it has access



to must be flyer-proofed for its safety.

During its free time, your flyer will find hidey-holes in your home that you never knew existed. If you do something as

simple as leaving your medicine chest door open, your flyer will find it.

Become regimented about closing doors and toilet lids, and start to think like a flyer; this protects both your little loved one and your belongings.

Chewing and keeping their teeth properly ground is an important part of a flying squirrel's behavior and anatomy. This often means your flyer will chew on things you'd prefer be unchewed, such as your computer cables, wood molding, furniture or favorite leather boots.

Instinctively arboreal, your little furball will realize it loves to climb. You will find it scampering up curtains, doorframes and bookcases. You will lose your flyer at least once and run madly looking for it, only to find it peering down at you from the top of a door as if you are crazy.

If you allow your flyer near your closet, you will practically never see it again. Hanging clothes bear a physical resemblance to tree branches. Items in the closet offer all kinds of pockets and folds to play in, shoes and plastic hangers to chew on, handbags to poop in and suitcases to climb up. Your flyer may try to move into your closet.

Flyer Surprises

At about one year of age, your flying squirrel will reach maturity. New instincts kick in with a vengeance. You will find it hilarious when your flyer steals tissues and socks to bring back to its favorite nest pouch as bedding. It may decide some material in your closet would make fabulous bedding and shred a garment — bit by bit, hole by hole. You are smitten and will think it adorable. You may take a handbag to a wedding, only to open it up and discover a perfect rounded out nest of tissues that your flyer has been sleeping in during playtime. At some point, you might go to clean your window curtains and a tissue nest will explode out from the valance. What a brilliant squirrel!

The most amusing behavior of pet flying squirrels is their insistence on stashing food *everywhere*. The implication that you, the loving flyer parent, might not provide a predictable food source for your flyer could be insulting. However, instinct is a powerful thing. If you grant your squirrel a healthy supply of treats, it will store nuts in your closet.

Almonds will start falling from the sky every time you get dressed. You'll find acorns in tissue boxes, cashews in potholders and pine nuts propped up between your window blinds. You will put a shoe on, feel discomfort and pull out a whole pecan.

The infusion of whimsy into your everyday routine will be much appreciated. The true amusement begins when you find *your* treats stashed away — jewelry, figurines, marbles,

Flyer Info

Life Span: In captivity, flying squirrels live between 10 to 15 years, requiring a long-term commitment from their human.

Species: *Glaucomys volans*, the Southern flying squirrel, is the most common pet species in the United States.

Size: Adult flying squirrels range from 7 to 10 inches long (including tail), and their adult weight ranges from 50 to 100 grams.

Habitat: To safely and responsibly house a single or pair of flying squirrels, a cage that is minimally 2 by 2 feet with 1/2-inch bar spacing is required. Bigger

is better. Necessary cage accessories include a safe running wheel and numerous pouches and perches hung at various heights. A water dish is a must and plenty of nesting material should be provided, such as pure cotton, tissues and fleece squares. Flyers need daily out-of-cage time for getting exercise and stretching their wings, intellectual enrichment and playing with their favorite human.

Diet: A flyer's diet consists of a wide variety of fruits and vegetables, mealworms, waxworms or crickets. Pesticide-free dandelions, rosehips, seed pods and branches are important to supplement. Raw nuts, acorns and pumpkin seeds should be given sparingly as treats.

Grooming: Flyers rarely require grooming but for the sake of their humans, investing in a good nail trimmer wheel attachment and a tube of Neosporin is highly recommended. They have sharp nails and your hands and arms will often boast tiny scratches.

Health: Flyers are susceptible to MBD (metabolic bone disease). A degenerative bone disease, MBD is easily prevented by supplementing the diet with calcium.

Training: It is possible to potty train flyers to urinate in a particular potty to some degree, but there will always be pellets and occasional puddles around your home.



Owning a flying squirrel is a long-term commitment, because they can live for 10 to 15 years.

Is Ownership LEGAL?

Because Southern flying squirrels are endemic to the United States, they are considered wildlife. The legal status of owning wildlife varies across the country. Government agencies aim to prevent the taking of wild Southern flyers to serve as pets.

In some states, it is illegal to capture wild flyers as pets, but other states have laws stating that it is illegal to even own a flyer, regardless of how a person came to have the animal. Some states grant permits, and some lack regulations altogether. In many states, it is perfectly legal to keep flyers as pets if they were rescued orphans and can't be released by a wildlife rehabilitation center. Local wildlife and animal control agencies on the city or county level could also have laws about flying squirrel ownership.

Because of their small nature and quiet demeanor, flyers are often kept as pets in states where it is officially not legal. Realistically, if there is no mistreatment, the local wildlife agencies would never have reason to investigate a pet owner. However, exotic veterinarians can refuse to treat a pet flyer if it is illegal in their state of practice. In the event you are discovered to harbor a flying squirrel in a state that forbids it, you may face hefty fines, giving up your beloved pet or even your flyer's euthanization.

You must research your state's wildlife laws, and local wildlife and animal control agencies when deciding whether a flyer is the right pet for you. If you get a flyer, ensure that you have access to a veterinarian who can treat your pet should the need arise.

Although cute, flying squirrels are not legal to own in all areas.



magnets, contact lens cases; nothing is off limits. If something strikes your flyer's fancy and is within carrying weight, off it goes — only to be discovered when you sort through your spring T-shirts.

The good news is that the stashes really are meant to be saved for later. Your belongings are unharmed, just misplaced. The nut stashes will mostly go uneaten so there won't be shredded messes. You can also dig the stashes out and give them back to your squirrel in order to avoid buying endless quantities of nuts. The bad news is that nuts everywhere can attract distant cousins of flying squirrels ... mice!

Dinner Time!

The silky brown and cream coat of a pet flying squirrel is kept bright and soft by a balanced diet of fruits, vegetables, insects and wild tidbits. The proper mix of leafy greens, vegetables such as mushroom, tomato and avocado, tubers, fruits ranging from apples to mangoes to blueberries and insects like crickets and squirmy moth larvae will keep your flyer happy and healthy.

Beware, though, as flyers have been likened to toddlers in their eating habits. One week they'll love a vegetable and the next, they'll not only turn their little noses up at it but throw it to the floor in disgust. A flying squirrel is never without personality.

When they do show fondness for a particular food, it is with an enthusiasm that tickles the soul. Flyer parents are often inspired to create fancy buffets of organic produce, blend smoothies and even stir-fry dinner for their furballs. After all of this work, your adult flyer will likely not even stick around to let you pet its soft fur. It has places to go and



Flying squirrels are able to glide because of the flap of skin that connects their wrists to their ankles.



things to do.

But before it runs off, it will make a pit stop — on your shirt.

Litter-training a flying squirrel is sometimes possible, but they're not consistent and nothing's ever foolproof. In addition to dozens of tiny dry pellets on your floor, furniture and just about everywhere else, expect to find an occasional puddle around your house, or on your shirt. Some people say it's a sign of love.

Expect to spend at least 10 minutes every night preparing dinner for your pet. Also plan to spend time in the garden to gather your pet's favorite wild foods. But whatever you do, don't take your flyer outside with you. Once it smells the fresh air, you'll never see it again! Amazingly, it is possible to buy acorns, rosehips and just about every variety of nuts-in-shell (good for tooth filing) on the Internet.

It is unclear how flying squirrels maintain healthy levels of vitamin D and calcium in the wild given their nocturnal tendencies, but they are prone to a deadly deficiency in captivity. You must supplement your flyer's



MIRIAM STEIN

Flying squirrels are curious, active animals that love to stash food, and sometimes they combine their exercise with their food stashing!

diet with calcium in a way that appeases its picky taste buds. Sprinkle calcium powder on your flyer's strawberries and see if it will happily gobble the important mineral. However, many flyers do not appreciate the chalky texture on their beloved strawberries. Chewable sources such as cuttlebones, antlers and flavored Tums might work or you can offer yogurt or the formula that your flyer loved in babyhood. Consult with your exotics veterinarian for the best method for your flyer.

Going to such lengths to please a tiny rodent may sound tedious to some but to those who are smitten with the little animals, it is an honor and a pleasure.

Think You're Ready?

So you think flying squirrels are the cutest rodents you've ever seen and you absolutely want one immediately. Think again. Owning a flyer is a lifestyle and a real life commitment — an expensive and time consuming one. Much like getting a dog, you are taking responsibility for the well-being of a thinking, feeling animal that relies on you for its safety and happiness. Before going to the trouble of finding and bringing home a flyer, make sure you

TO FLY Or Not To Fly?

A better name for flying squirrels might have been gliding squirrels, as flyers cannot actually sustain flight, but rather glide through the air. Much like sugar gliders, flying squirrels have a flap of furry skin extending along each side of the body from the wrist to the ankle.

A flyer achieves flight by climbing and launching itself from a fixed object. It stretches its furry flaps, called patagia, which serve as a kind of parachute device. The flyer can adjust the tautness of the patagia to maneuver and, in another impressive feat of evolution, uses its broad flat tail as a stabilizing rudder.

Although they can't sustain flight, flying squirrels can reach impressive distances and have remarkable maneuverability. A glide always starts from a higher point and the animal uses its flaps, limbs and tail to control its direction and landing. Gravity takes hold, so the squirrel lands well below its original launch height. Wild flying squirrels are said to be able to travel a horizontal distance of 100 feet from a height of 50 feet. Captive flying squirrels, lacking the tall trees needed to practice attaining such distances, usually follow a 1:1 ratio. A leap from a 10-foot bookcase will likely result in the squirrel landing 10 feet away on the ground or on its favorite human.



Flying squirrels glide instead of flying, and the higher up they are when they launch into the air, the farther they glide.



COURTESY SOPHIA PEÑA-GARZA

A good way to bond with a baby flying squirrel is to carry it in your shirt pocket or a bonding pouch every day during the first few weeks you have it.

are ready for the long haul.

In the wild, flying squirrels are lucky to reach the age of 5, often falling prey to snakes, owls, hawks and raccoons. However, they live between 10 to 15 years in captivity, requiring a long-term commitment from their human. Plan for the future when considering a flying squirrel as a pet. College dorms don't usually allow giant cages with flying furry residents, and it isn't easy to find a squirrel-sitter if you want to take a vacation. The addition of a baby or other pets can pose serious physical and emotional stress to your flat-tailed flying family.

Remember how hard you worked to ensure your flyer bonded to you? Well, it will expect you to play with it for the duration of its life. Keeping them in pairs is helpful but flyers need their mommy/daddy playtime or they may get depressed, irritable and unfriendly. Most likely, if your flyer feels neglected, it will cheep at you until you pay it the attention it wants. If your flyer has free rein in your bedroom, apartment or house, you may find it jumping on your head late at night because it's bored and wants company. Endearing or unappealing? 🐾

Miriam Stein is a writer, photographer and photo editor specializing in nature and conservation.



Visit SmallAnimalChannel.com/FlyingSquirrelSlideShow to see more photos of flying squirrels.



Flying squirrels eat a varied diet and require a calcium supplement.

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