The Hedgehog Welfare Society

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What is a Hedgehog Anyway?

By Jennifer Plombon, HWS

Those of us lucky enough to share our home with a pet hedgehog think we know what they are; our pet hedgehogs are African hedgehogs, many generations away from their wild relatives, but still have wild little hearts. They are of the Order Insectivora, Genus *Atelerix*. But I'm sure you've all had that experience of telling someone you have a pet hedgehog, receiving a puzzled look, and then a reply showing that they don't know what they are. Not at all. What are some of the things they *think* you have?

Things with prickles or spikes:

Tenrecs (Family tenrecidae Species echinops telfairi)
By Vicki McLean, HWS

Most of us who take in hedgehogs who are relinquished know that every so often someone asks us to "pick up this hedgehog." My first lesser tenrec was from a Washington State Humane Society who received an abandoned animal from a vacant apartment. They initially put "hedgehog" in the species space. They told me they were so worried about him--he was small, with a bare face and belly so they had called the veterinarian. When the veterinarian left, he crossed out hedgehog and replaced it with tenrec. So, I knew I'd be learning about a new species.

This process was made more complicated by my realization that tenrecs of all types are prohibited in Oregon. (So are long-eared hedgehogs.) It isn't difficult to get permission, but it requires proving you know how to care for the little guys, have a vet and s/he doesn't get loose or have babies in Oregon. There's regular reporting and paperwork.

After I realized one would be coming to live with me, I called a friend in Oklahoma who had taken in tenrecs and asked her a multitude of questions. Then I drove to Vancouver to pick up the tenrec. I took him to my brother's house, and my sister-in-law and I went shopping for him. Since tenrecs are native to Madagascar, I decided to name him an appropriately Malagasy name—Tsiory. We had no information about this tenrec, but he appeared healthy.

I learned that they are semi-arboreal and need lots of things to climb on and hide in. They shouldn't get wet, and they use sand baths, so I set up a sand bath in a tiny bathtub. I also gave him a beach to use as a bathing area. Last year, a friend and I traveled to Madagascar in hopes of seeing some tenrecs and learn more about their habitat. The lesser tenrecs like to sleep in tree holes in the Baobab Forest in Southwest Madagascar. A guide helped us find three, each of a different color, asleep in a tree hole. There was a platinum blonde which is a color I hadn't seen.

There are yet more differences between tenrecs and the unrelated hedgehog family. Tenrecs, unlike some hedgehog species which don't really hibernate, go into torpor every winter. When they choose to go in and out of torpor is—anybody's guess. They do wake up periodically to eat and drink so it's important to have live bugs, a

little kibble and water available to them no matter how long it's been since you've seen them out and about. That first winter was so tough for me. My mantra was "don't die, don't die, don't die."

I fell in love with this little guy. It wasn't too long before someone wanted to find an experienced home for her newly acquired tenrec because her husband had been transferred to California. The little tenrec was a baby and I named her Pixel—then back to Fish and Wildlife for authorization. The F&W guy is my friend now because I've gone to him so often.

For the most part, tenrecs won't eat dead bugs, and Pixel loved her dubia roaches. One night I had finished up a medical procedure, and I was so tired that I gave everybody their kibble but just couldn't face chasing dubias with forceps. The next day, when I opened the door to put her bowls in the cage, she rushed out, flung herself off the shelf, grabbed the edge of the bowl and while hanging in space pulled herself into the bowl and chased the dubias in tiny circles around that tiny space. I like her style.

Tsiory died after several years, and I was very sad. The pathology showed he was quite old, but since we have no history it's hard to say how old. Now I have Bob, Pixel and Tsiky. Tsiky is a tiny baby girl from Hedgies in the Pines. She's a pet. She's the first tenrec who had trouble waking up in spring. Several warm days basking with me in the back yard did the trick. She eats her whole dinner now and I find her all over the cage.

Now for some factoids:

There are eight genera and 31 species of tenrecs. Four of them are vulnerable and two endangered due to habitat loss.

Tenrecs are the only mammal other than marsupials that have a cloaca. To know their sex for certain, you need to send a saliva swab to the Czech Republic to test their DNA. All of mine have been tested. (Also, my experienced exotic vet pushed lightly on Tsiory's abdomen and proudly announced that a little penis had poked out. I already knew he was male.

Tenrecs have the lowest body temperature of any other mammal, down to 72 degrees. Sometimes when you pick them up, they feel clammy.

A common ancestor is the elephant. Go figure.

There is no clear answer as to how tenrecs got to Madagascar; but the two theories I know about are that they floated (when, no one knows, everything floated I guess). A more reasonable explanation is that land bridges came up and receded over millions of years allowing animals to cross to Madagascar from Africa, India or Antarctica.

It's one of 16 Mammal species that will have its genome sequenced as part of the Mammalian Genome Project.

My little ones have never bitten anyone, except my sister-in-law, because she has cats. My hedgehogs bite her too. And when a friend kept pretending that she was going to poke his belly, Bob opened his mouth wide to warn her off. But they DO have teeth, and their jaws are significantly stronger than most hedgehog jaws.

There are only a few of these species in the US pet trade. The lesser tenrec is the most common, but there is also the common tenrec, greater tenrec, lowland- and highland- streaked tenrec.

The most unique and wonderful species are the lowland-streaked tenrec and highland streaked tenrec. This species simply does not do well in captivity and are outrageously expensive and fail frequently. They look like an outsized bumblebee, or as a friend says, a love child between a bumblebee and a hedgehog. Streaked tenrecs have distinct stripe patterns, and both species use stridulation for echolocation. I could find no other mammal that does that.

In short, tenrecs are a different species with a different set of needs than hedgehogs. They are sweet little animals with long lives—up to 17 years. Before choosing a tenrec to house, make sure you want to care for them for up to 17 years. I don't need more.

If you have questions, please feel free to ask me at poogs_house@msn.com

Below are Tenrecs Tsiky, Tsiory and Bob

Echidnas Echidnas are my favorite mammal. They are of the Order Monotremata, which means they have a single (mono) external genital/urinary/excretory opening, called a cloaca, and they lay eggs, which are incubated and hatched outside the mother's body. Like other mammals, they do make milk for their babies, which flows from mammary glands inside a pouch in which the babies grow. Found only in New Guinea, Australia and Tasmania, if you are ever lucky enough to see one, you'll be captivated as I was. Their spines are very long and thick, and they have the ability to roll completely into a ball for protection. They are powerful diggers; their rear feet look as if they were put on backwards, and when they dig, dirt is flung away from the hole by those feet. I once watched an Echidna dig a hole and completely submerge himself in it in a few short minutes. Their adorable babies with their adorable backwards feet are called "puggles". Fun facts: Echidnas don't have teeth. Echidnas don't have stomachs, either, their food is chewed and goes straight to their intestines. For some more facts and photos, visit https://tinyurl.com/bdeec5ua

Here is a Short-nosed Echidna just enjoying the day, and a puggle checking out the world.

Porcupines Lots of people have assumed I have a pet porcupine, and have wondered how I avoid the "quills they shoot out". Oh, so many misunderstandings here. While it's possible, in some places, to have a pet porcupine, it is not recommended. They are large, smelly, have specialized diets and health needs, need lots of space to roam, and are generally not friendly towards humans. They do not "shoot" their quills. Their quills, which are barbed, are very loosely attached to their skin and at the least threat, they raise them and back towards the threat. Anyone who doesn't move and gets quilled will regret it, because the barbed

quills cannot be pulled out without causing a larger wound and probable infection; thus medical care is necessary. Some porcupine species are friendlier than others, and Prehensile-tailed Porcupines, found in Mexico, Central and South America, can be rather charming and are often found in zoos. Below is a photo of a Prehensile-tailed Porcupine, and a painting made for me by a porcupine in a small zoo in Michigan where a friend of mine works. She (the porcupine) holds the brush in her hands and seems to enjoy painting.

Sea urchins OK, this is strange one, but based on a true story. A sea urchin is a marine invertebrate, not something you would find, or that survive, outside the ocean. But several years ago, an HWS member was alerted when an emergency call was made to a police department about a sea urchin on someone's lawn. Fortunately one of the officers was an animal rescuer and concluded it was probably a hedgehog, so he offered to take the call. Sure enough, it was an albino hedgehog, and he called Dawn Wrobel, a noted hedgehog expert, to take custody of him and care for him until the owner could be found or he could be released from custody. He turned out to be a very sweet boy but was never returned to the sea. Hmmmm … do you see the resemblance?

Things that curl up:

Pangolins For an example of the incredible cruelty inflicted on innocent animals by greedy, venal, selfish and ignorant humans, may I suggest you read about what is happening to Pangolins in this world? Based on a completely unfounded belief that their scales treat human health problems, these gentle, ancient, innocent creatures are well on the way to being made extinct. Who would harm this adorable animal? Note the babies riding on Mom's back.

Armadillos Natives of North, Central and South America and Mexico, armadillos are GREAT at curling up. Their bodies are covered with segmented armoured plates, and when they curl up, the plates often fit together like puzzle pieces, completely protecting the animal, as seen here below left. As with porcupines, it may be possible to keep one as a pet, but they are not cuddly or social and need a specialized environment, food and health care. A particularly cute armadillo is the Pink Fairy Armadillo from Argentina, which I devoutly hope does not become a popular pet (below right).

Pill bugs Sometimes called roly-polys, these little creatures aren't insects but crustaceans, and they breathe through gills. The mothers carry the eggs and then the juvenile roly-polys in a pouch, like marsupials. They can drink water through their anus, and also consume their feces to retain the copper they need and would otherwise lose in their feces (but not ALL of their feces; read on). Many years ago, I noticed some strange brown objects in a crack near my front door. Concerned that it meant mice were trying to get into the house, my husband installed a small motion sensor camera aimed at the objects. A few nights later, we captured the culprits; a pill bug wandered into the scene, turned upside down onto its back with its butt in the air, and little rown feces came shooting out. It was so funny and cute, I gained an appreciation for these little beings. Here's the pill bug litter pan by our front door. It is still used today by new generations of pill bugs.

Things that "sound" like "hedgehog":

Groundhog Many people have confidently asserted to me that they have a "hedgehog" in their yard. Since this would be endangering to an Africa hedgehog who needs warmth and protection, I try to get details. "Oh yes", they say, "it's big and brown and lives under my shed and eats my plants." Hmmmm. Eventually we determine that it's a groundhog, otherwise known as a woodchuck. Groundhogs are rodents, not insectivores, and much hardier than our pet hedgehogs. They *do* have a connection to hedgehogs, however; in Europe, the advent of spring was forecast by observing when bears, badgers or hedgehogs left their burrows. This celebration of "Hedgehog Day" didn't work in North America once it was settled, due to our dearth of hedgehogs, so groundhogs were substituted and thus we celebrate "Ground Hog Day." I volunteer in wildlife rehabilitation and fondly remember a particular groundhog we had in care for a while. She was quite grumpy and would try to bite us when we cleaned her enclosure; you do NOT want to be bitten by large rodent teeth. Soon we realized that she really loved apples, and started plying her with pieces of apple as we cleaned, to distract her. She recovered from her car-induced wound and was ready for release, but oooops; the vet determined she was overweight and needed to stay in rehab until she lost some of that weight, which we had caused by giving her so many apples. Who wouldn't want to give this cutie a piece of apple?

All of these hedgehog substitutes are special in their own way, and we can celebrate their existence, which we might not have learned about if not for hedgehog confusion.

HWS Wheel-a-Thon

The HWS Wheel-a-Thon was held in June. There were 7 teams competing, and as of this writing, the total raised was $2,808.05. This includes $800 given by HWS Board members as matching donations. Gifts were sent to team leaders, and our thanks go out to everyone who participated; these funds will help many hedgehogs and their rescuers with vet assistance and other needs.

New Board Members

The HWS welcomes new Board members Kim Burk, Meg McCarney. We love their enthusiasm to help hedgehogs.

Kin introduces herself:

My name is Kim Burk and I have been rescuing hedgehogs for the HWS in Virginia Beach, VA since 2019. Since becoming a member of the Board of Directors, I have been assisting the HWS with social media and public relations. When I'm not helping hedgehogs, I am working in the sports medicine department at a local childrens' hospital. In my free time I enjoy spending time at the beach with my husband, hedgehog and 3 dogs.

Meg introduces herself:

Hi, I'm Meg!

When I'm not working in marketing for an animal advocacy organization, I'm proud to volunteer with HWS as one of two USDA liaisons on the board.

My journey with hedgehogs began when I adopted my sweet boy, Monty.

Monty opened my eyes to the love, joy, and purpose these little ones bring to all who are lucky enough to care for them. Like any first-time hedgehog parent, I quickly learned how vital it is to find and share accurate, compassionate care information so they can live the long, happy lives they deserve.

Today, I'm grateful to be a hedgie mom to four-month-old Bumper. I love being part of the HWS team as we work to protect and advocate for these amazing animals.

Animal welfare is at the center of my life—from my work, to my volunteering, to eating a plant-based diet—and I wouldn't have it any other way!