

African Pygmy Hedgehogs

by Colin Bradbury

Is a Hog for me?

It does not matter if you are planning to buy or rescue a hog, there are some basics questions you need to consider:

Hedgehogs do not make good pets for a large portion of the U.K public.

Forget the cute faces. Forget the cute pictures and anything you have read in the media.

The pictures you see are always of extremely young hogs. You will never be allowed to have one at that age from a reputable breeder, the advice accompanying the photos is nearly always wrong and in some cases, downright dangerous.

It takes a certain kind of someone to really enjoy any exotic mammal for what they are and hedgehogs are no different. Hedgehogs do not make great first time exotic mammals and you should know what you are getting into before you decide you would like to try.

Lets consider the most basic points you should be ready for.

- **Hedgehogs are solitary animals**, they must be kept on their own, that means one animal in one enclosure. Males will often fight to the death and, although less likely, females can also do this. A pair will continuously mate and destroy litters one after another. The Animal Welfare Act clearly states that anyone in charge of an animal must follow the rules and failure to do so is a criminal offence. So if someone tells you that they can live in pairs, or live in groups they are breaking the law. Post pictures up on a website or pass the advice on to someone else and you could find yourself in very hot water. The Welfare Act Rules are:
 - a suitable environment (how it is housed)
 - a suitable diet (what it eats and drinks)
 - the ability to exhibit normal behavior patterns
 - any need it has to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
 - protection from pain, suffering, injury and disease.
- **Size of enclosure.** Any Hedgehog species requires room, and to be working within the Welfare Act, any animal must be able to display its natural behavior patterns. This cannot be achieved within the confines of their enclosure only. Hedgehogs and Tenrec species need to explore and forage, this means they must have time out of the enclosure each evening and should be placed in a hog-proof room where they can run and explore in a supervised manner. Even at this time two males or a male and female should never be in the same room at the same time. Please take into consideration here that hedgehogs poop while running, they cannot help it, it is what comes natural to them so a room with a nice carpet for example would probably make a poor choice for out-of-cage time, not to mention the pee that would be soaked into it.

- **Must be housed in a suitable environment.** Although this is open to interpretation, you will find yourself having a hard time explaining to people how a 12" x 12" x 12" exo-terra viv (as per the shop we have just reported in Teeside is about to find out) is suitable for any mammal never mind a hog that will naturally runs up to 5 miles throughout the evening . A sensible enclosure will be 40" long by 15" wide **as a minimum**, this means the most widely used housing, the Hagen Zoo Zone 2, falls just in to the minimum size you should use, any smaller than this is simply unacceptable. The enclosure **must** include a device to allow the natural behavior of running up to 5 miles a night, this is generally in the form of a wheel which must be cleaned of poop every day, scrubbing it with hot water and pet friendly disinfectant. It is not a pleasant job.

These are simply the most basic of care requirements, some of the other things you should consider if you are still considering purchasing a hog as a pet, are the following:

- **Do you have time?** Hedgehogs are time-consuming and require a daily routine to keep them in a friendly and healthy condition. If you cannot give at least an hour a day to your hedgehog, then this is the wrong pet for you .
- **Do you mind getting poop and pee on your clothes, yourself and your furniture?** Hedgehogs are not the cleanest animals in the world and unless you don't mind this, then a hedgehog is not for you
- **Smell.** All animals have a smell, some more than others, hedgehogs have their own smell, tenrecs even more so. Cleaning your pet out each day will eliminate a lot of this but if smell bothers you, then you should think twice about having one as a pet
- **When things go wrong.** Hedgehogs are not treated by all vets, not even all exotic vets, many simply do not know enough about them to be confident in treating them. Before you buy a hedgehog find out which is the closest vet to you that will treat them. You will be extra lucky to find a tenrec trained vet and will most likely have to travel a fair distance to find someone who is willing to even look at them let alone treat them. If your animal becomes ill, highly likely as hedgehogs seem to be able to conjure illness out of thin air, and you cannot afford to get to the closest vet that will treat then what will you do? Doing nothing is in violation of the Welfare Act and you will be prosecuted if you do not take action
- **Noise.** So you may think a hedgehog will be a quite pet, well you would be very wrong. Running up to 5 miles an evening on a wheel means that even the most silent wheels often vibrate, move and rub against things, it is not uncommon for people to need to get up during the night and adjust the wheel to make it quite again. If you are a light sleeper I would suggest a hedgehog is not the best pet for you
- **Going away.** Who will look after your pet? Have you got someone who is willing to put up with these things? A hedgehog can be just as restricting as a dog or cat when you want to go on holiday but with the added problem of no kennels to leave them in.
- **Cleaning.** Spot cleaning should be done everyday as well as cleaning of the wheel. As we have already discussed the wheel requires scrubbing of any poop and pee (and there will be some, probably more than you could ever imagine) plus the enclosure requires the removal of poop and pee each day. The simplest way is to simply pick this out by hand, with the surrounding substrate, replacing with fresh. If the thought of hog poop on your hands is not your idea of a great experience then please look elsewhere for a pet .

So you have read all the above and you are happy that nothing we have mentioned is either too much work or anything you're not used to already, then congratulations, a hog may well be a fantastic pet for you. For the right type of person with the right knowledge and understanding, a exotic hog can make a wonderful pet and will entertain you for hours on end. You will enjoy the challenge of keeping this animal and look forward to bonding with it, and making its time on this earth a pleasant one. My time with my hogs has been extremely rewarding and has put exotic hogs high on my favorite animal list. I am constantly researching more and more about their natural habitats and trying build on the knowledge that previous keepers have passed to us. There is still so much to learn about these wonderful creatures, with very little known about some of the tenrec species. In the right hands they make some of the most fascinating exotic mammals you could wish to own .

In the wrong hands however they make a really poor choice, just another fad, another turtle, tortoise, snake or reptile that will be bought by people with no forethought and left to the people who really care to pick up the pieces when the next fad comes along.

For anyone looking to breed from these wonderful creatures: if you're looking to make money you have missed the boat, you will not make money from them. The current fad is already over its peak, please move on to the next big thing and leave hogs for the serious people who wish to make a difference.

Bringing your new hog home

The journey home combined with a change in environment can be very stressful for any new hedgehog. he will have just been removed from the security of its immediate family, its brothers/sisters and its mum. It will be in new surroundings and have new tastes and smell to overcome. There are however a few things you can do to help your new hog through this time.

I will have given you some of the hogs staple food that he was fed here with us. Please feed this food for the first couple of days and if you wish to change onto a new food then add in slowly the new food over a period of time. Increasing the ratio of old food to new until the old food has run out.

I will also supply you with a small amount of the hogs favourite treat. In our hogs this happens to be freeze dried meal worms. Try offering your hog a couple of these every time you handle him. This will help him associate your smell with good things.

For the first evening and when you get your hog home, while he is awake from transporting him it is OK to hold him before you put him into its housing, but please refrain from too much handling on the first evening. Around 20 minutes max. After this time settle him into the new home and leave alone for the rest of the day/night. You may of course observe him running around his enclosure that evening. Again he will probably be very jumpy as everything is new, so try and keep noise and movement to a minimum.

It may take two or three days before he is totally comfortable in his new environment. It is still important to handle him through this time, but 20 mins each evening is OK. If you feel he is fine and enjoying the time out then feel free to keep him out for longer. All hogs are different and some will change over without any bother at all, where as some become a little shy and withdrawn

through the first few days.

Quilling

Your hog will come to you at anywhere between 6 and 12 weeks old depending on how long they take to fully wean from their parents. Unfortunately at around this time is also the time that quilling happens.

Actually the hogs go through many quillings throughout their lives, and will already have been through one or two before you get him. However the quilling at 8 - 12 weeks is a major quilling for them where they lose all their baby quills and get their adult ones. The adult quills are much thicker than the baby quills and can be very uncomfortable for the hog involved.

Some hogs go through this with no upset at all, and some suffer really badly. We have found this is normally worse in the lighter coloured skinned hogs, mainly albino. It cannot be stressed enough that even though your hog will no doubt protest at being handled at this stage in its life, it is also the most important time for bonding. Perseverance through this time will reward you with a very calm hog that enjoys being handled when quilling is finished.

As the new quills come through they are very sharp. If you need to then wear a pair of gloves through this time but do allow the hog to run on you and sit/sleep on you. It is your smell it must learn to accept. I prefer not to use gloves, but some people find it too hard on their hands. It is far better to wear gloves and handle than not handle at all.

Also note you will notice an increase in scratching during this period. As when the new quills come through they pierce the skin and itch badly as the skin heals. This is quite normal and nothing to worry about.

To help your hog through this period, if the scratching is bad or you feel he is hurting too much then an oatmeal bath will relieve the scratching and soothe the skin. It should also calm the hog down. However I would not recommend this more than once a week over a few weeks while quilling. Too much water will dry your hogs skin out, washing it clear of the natural oils the skin produces, so over washing can become counter productive.

This main quilling can last from a couple of days to a couple of months. It totally depends on the individual hog. No two hogs are the same, even from the same litter.

Diet

Under no circumstances should you give your hog milk. They are lactose intolerant and it may kill them.

You will have received the sample of the food your hog is on now (see bringing your hog home for how to swap over to another brand type) you will see by the sample that the staple of hogs is standard cat kibble available in most shops and supermarkets. This has been looked at in great detail and various foods have been tried and tested, including dedicated hog food, however the results always show a good quality cat food to be the best. I leave a bowl of their staple food in the enclosure at all times, along with a bowl of water which is refreshed once or twice a day. Other food

should be offered on occasion. Treats include: ground chicken/turkey - cooked, fresh veg carrots etc (note not all hogs will accept veg. If yours does not then do not worry) plain scrambled egg (no milk) is another favourite, along with wet cat food (not fish), cottage cheese. You will need to experiment with your hog as to what he likes the most.

One important thing to keep in mind is that there have been reports out of America, where these have been kept as pets for much longer than the UK, that some hogs have had very bad reactions to fish and seafood based food items including cat food. so please refrain from using anything containing these items to be on the safe side.

Treats

Nearly all hogs go mad for mealworms, however they are quite fatty and can cause fatty liver disorder, so should only be fed as a treat in either a few each night or a larger portion each week. They also enjoy any other insects you can find. All these can be fed either live or freeze dried. I prefer freeze dried as you do not have the worry of keeping the food alive for a period of time and also the thought of the food escaping. Many people use locusts and cockroaches, however you need to make these immobile to help the hogs catch them or they will most likely escape from the cage before the hog has chance of eating them.

Housing

There are endless amounts of enclosures that can be used for hogs. Most have their pros and cons and there really is not one that is better than all the rest, so I will just go through some of the more common ones used, so you can decide for yourself which enclosure suits you best.

Zoozone 2 - This is probably the most commonly used enclosure for hogs and makes a very good house. They are plastic with a open vented roof. There is enough space to comfortably fit a wheel, water and food bowls and a house or sleeping bag. They are very easy to clean. The only drawback is they are not designed to be stacked on top of each other, so bare this in mind if you have more than one hog, as good air flow will be prevented by stacking them.

Indoor rabbit enclosures - These are also very good housing for hogs, if the larger sizes are used. They provide ample space for wheel, water, food and sleeping area. They are normally plastic based with a metal cage top, enabling them to be stacked quite easy. The main downside to these is the ability of the hogs to climb the cage top sides which could result in the hog falling from a height and causing damage to itself, however not all hogs are climbers and many will not attempt to climb the sides, and those that do and fall, will generally fall and be no worse for wear. This is a consideration you should keep in mind. Many people add Perspex to the sides of these cages to stop all climbing, which seems to work very well.

Vivariums - Vivs make another great enclosure for hogs, normally made of wood and available in many sizes. Generally Vivs 4ft or larger are used by hog owners as these provide the space needed inside. They are also very easy to clean. The main downside to them is the air flow and ventilation. This is normally overcome by simply adding extra vents. Vents are readily available through most

reptile shops and on e-bay. If you are getting a viv made then the builder can normally add extra vents for mammal use at no or little extra cost. Vivs also have the added attraction of being very attractive and can be made as a great addition to any front room, however they also tend to be a bit more expensive than the other options discussed here.

Custom made / DIY - A lot of people chose to build their own enclosures. Building your own is the most flexible way as you can choose your own dimensions and can be made in sizes not available elsewhere. There are a few considerations to take into account. The inside surfaces should be waterproof to stop waste and water seeping into the surface, and if the design calls for an open top, then the sides must be high enough that a fully grown adult hog can not reach the rim. An adult hog will have little difficulty pulling its own body weight up and over the rim if its front feet can grab hold of it. The options with a DIY build are really only limited by your imagination and can often cost much less than the commercial alternatives.

Rubs - Rubbermaid type tubs can also be used as long as size of floor space and height of the side walls are taken into consideration. These can be often found quite cheap and make a good home, however they can not be stacked and are open topped so would need to be modified if you have other pets in the house such as cats and dogs.

Bedding

There are several options for bedding. Again none of them are the correct or incorrect way to house your hog. They all offer some good and some bad points. You need to find what is best for you. Below are some examples of things I use / have used and my observations about them.

Sawdust - Sawdust can be used and is fairly inexpensive. It can be bought very cheaply online and can easily be found in your local shop / supermarket if you run out, however I find sawdust by its very nature cause a lot of mess no matter how careful you are, it ends up all over the house and the hogs end up covered in it and trail it around the house when they are out in the evening. Another drawback is it very dusty and this can cause the hogs to sneeze and scratch far more than with any other type of bedding.

Wood chippings - Again fairly inexpensive. Large bales can be bought on e-bay very cheap and last a long time. Much cleaner than sawdust and far better than sawdust at soaking up any liquid. Its larger size also means its less messy and easier to Hoover up any bits that do escape. This is my bedding of choice at the moment.

Wood based cat litter – A bit more expensive but totally dust free. Soaks up liquid very well indeed. My only concern with this is that it is very uneven for the hogs to walk on, and not as soft as the other bedding used. Note: you will also need to supply another type of bedding for the hog to sleep on / in. Another concern is it tends to turn into powder when wet and can be quite messy

Newspaper - Simple and free if you let people know you want their old papers. Dust free and makes a very good base. The downside is that unlike all the above bedding, a newspaper bottom must be changed everyday where as the others may be spot cleaned every day and renewed on a weekly basis. With just one hog this makes little difference as it only takes a little while to change out, but for people who have more hogs it can become quite time consuming depending on how

many hogs you have. Newspaper can also be shredded to make the sleeping area.

Blanket / fleece - This is only really an option if you manage to potty train your hog. If you do manage this, and are happy it always uses the litter tray, then a blanket makes a wonderful bedding, and only requires changing every week, however if your hog sometimes does not use the litter tray then a blanket will become very smelly very quickly and will need changing out every day, a messy experience. Although some people do manage to clean or replace them every day with great results

In the end you really do need to find what works best for you.

Sleeping Area

Again there are a few options here and none are better than the other. It again depends on what your preference is. The hogs are just as happy in any of them.

Igloo - Igloos are very popular. Made of plastic they are easy to clean and can be filled with your choice of bed usually small animal bedding, wood chippings or ripped up newspaper.

Wooden bridge - Available in many shops. Quite cheap in pets at home. Most use the large size to make a shelter, then there sleeping bedding is added inside. They also provide a safe wood for your hog to chew on.

Sleeping pouch - The hogs love these, and they have the added benefit of being able to pick them out of the enclosure complete with hog inside. Hogs will generally go straight inside at end of play and you can then pop the whole thing back in the enclosure. There are two things to be aware of with these; if using wood chippings and sawdust it will cling to the sides of the pouch and be spread about the house, so they're best used with either newspaper bedding or wood based cat litter bedding. If breeding, you cannot see into the pouch very well, but all in all these make a very good sleeping area when combined with a newspaper bottom and is easily the cleanest set-up

Toys

Although you may play with your hog for extensive amounts of time, the fact is, sooner or later it will be bed time for you and your hog will still be awake. It will need something to stop it becoming bored during the late hours of the night. The one item I will say is paramount for any hog is a good running wheel. This cannot be expressed enough and after a few days you will realise just why. It will be the most used thing your hog has. As he uses this through most of the night, it is in your interest to obtain the quietest wheel you can find although the quiet ones will not be the cheapest, it will be more than worth it in sleepless nights with cheaper and louder wheels.

There are two types that hog owners use, and both are as good as each other. On a budget the quietest wheels are either - the 12" flying saucer wheels or the 12" silent spinners. About the best money can buy. For ultra-quiet wheels you need to look towards the specialist stealth wheel but these come in at approx twice the price of the afore mentioned wheels.

Other toys that can be out in the cage are standard cat toys. You will need to experiment on which your hog plays with or ignores.

For out of the cage, again cat toys can be used, but the hogs like nothing better than running around the floor exploring every nook and cranny. Tubes and runs can be used to great effect. If you would rather the hog did not have free roam when out, a small animal play pen makes a good addition for the hog to play in while out of the enclosure, of course they will also enjoy running around you and climbing all over you, often choosing to go to sleep on your shoulder or trying to hide in your clothing.

Temperature

Hogs are very happy living at the same temperature as us, and need no extra heating unless you house them in a particularly cold room of the house. If this is the case a simple heat mat set under the enclosure with a thermostat set to approx 70 - 75 deg will do fine. In most centrally heated houses no extra heat is required. The general rule is, if you feel cold the hog feels cold. If unsure then check the area you intend to house your hog with a thermometer during the coldest part of the night. If the temp drops below 69 deg then a heat mat should be used as a fail safe feature. **Remember if the temp drops much below 69 deg then there is a chance the hog will try and hibernate. This can be fatal to this type of hog so must be avoided.** Most rooms that you use will not drop below this temperature.

Cleaning your hog out

The hog should be cleaned out completely on a weekly basis. Strip the full enclosure down and clean out with a pet safe disinfectant. Wash any cloth bedding and replace any wood based bedding. Clean out all food and water bowls.

Each day you will need to spot clean your enclosure, cleaning out any waste and topping up water and food bowls. Replace if the hog has fowled in the bowl. If using newspaper as a base bedding then this should be replaced daily. Wheels will have to be cleaned daily as the hogs will often poop on them while running. This is easily cleaned off the next morning with hot water and a scouring pad. If you need to clean your hog, then an oatmeal bath can be used but should be limited to once a month only (unless quilling - see above), fragrance free wet wipes may be used in between, wiping the quills from head to tail. Mild kitten shampoo can also be used but also limited to once a month as it can dry out the skin.

Oatmeal bath

to make an oatmeal bath, simply purchase any oatmeal cereal from the supermarket, pour a cupful into a filter bag or stocking, then run under the tap, filling the sink to approx 5-6" of water, ensure the water is of the temp you would use for a baby. You can squeeze the filter bag/stocking to get more oatmeal into the water, then simply use one hand to support your hog and the other hand to scoop water over him, expect him to protest at this and also probably poop in the water, they really hate it, but they do not realise you are doing it to help them. After 3-4 mins remove the hog and dry off with a towel, do not rinse off. Then place the hog somewhere it will not get cold or chilled.

Other things of note

Your hog will make several noises and do several things that look odd, these are something you will get used to. The main things of note are huffing and anointing. You will most likely encounter both of these within the first few days of owning your hog .

Huffing - It's your hog's way of warning people it is there and wants to be left alone. Some huff more than others. Some simply huff, others accompany this with popping sounds and jumping up and down. Normally, once you have picked the hog up and it realises who you are it will stop as quickly as it started. This is worst during the main quilling from weeks 8 to 12.

Anointing - All hogs do this when they encounter a new taste or sometimes smells they have never encountered before. They foam at the mouth and then spread this foam on their back, opinion is divided as to why they do this and it can look quite peculiar when you first notice it,

Poop & Pee - When young they really do have little control of when and where they go, and much like people they tend to need to go just after they have woken up. This often means people will wake the hog up and start handling it, only to find it thanks them with a poop or pee on their clothing. This decreases a lot with age, but to minimise this while young, I prefer to wake my hogs and put them into a play pen with newspaper on the floor, and play with them in there for 5 - 10 mins. They will generally do their business in this time and then can be safely taken out and allowed to roam about the room, or yourself, with the least chance of them making a mistake on you or the floor .

Boy or Girl - There is no real answer to this. Both make as good a pet as the other. There are a couple of minor differences that may help you decide. Mainly a boy is less messy and seems to do far less poops and pees in the cage, on their wheel and on you, so if this is something you are concerned about, maybe a boy is for you. The other main difference is that boys tend to grow a lot smaller than females, so if you want a little hog then a boy may be best. However that being said all hogs are different and some will always go against the norm. Temperament wise both can make just as good a pet and it mainly depends on the amount of time you are willing to put into bonding with your hog though the first couple of months.

Can't look after your hog any more?

Breeders should offer to take back any hog you can no longer look after for any reason. Sadly this doesn't always apply and this is where the National Exotic Rescue steps in and the animal will be given a permanent home. There will be no cash refund for this, but you can be assured of the utmost care given for the rest of the hogs life and all its needs catered for. If you wish to sell your hog on for any reason please ensure you find a suitable home for him to go to and please give the new owner a copy of this care sheet. A new care sheet can be given at anytime if needed.

National Exotic Hedgehog Rescue and Information

<http://www.homelesshogs.co.uk/>

Emergency calls only - 07934 428251

Email for non-urgent correspondence only - exotichedgehogrescue@yahoo.com