

Not Your Average Pets: The Special Care of Exotic Animals

The smooth, forked tongue tickled Zach’s arm. He was used to this from many years of holding and playing with the snake; snakes use their tongues to smell, and Zach knew that this was Sadie, the snake’s, way of saying hello. Zach reached out and stroked the snake’s slim, scaly body. He smiled, until he remembered why Brandon, his best friend and Sadie’s guardian, had invited him over.

“So you’re really moving?” he asked, hoping there was some mistake; he couldn’t bear the thought of losing his best friend. “Your parents already sold the house?”

“Yeah,” Brandon sighed. “We’re moving to the city. And that means we can’t take Sadie. Dad said there’s not enough room for her terrarium in the new apartment, so we have to give her away.”

Zach could see the tears welling up in his best friend’s eyes. Sadie had been their devoted friend for three years, when Brandon found the young snake at a pet store. Now, their threesome was going to be broken apart forever.

Suddenly, Brandon’s face lit up.

“Zach! Why don’t you take Sadie? You have enough space for her terrarium and you know how to take care of her better than anyone! Then, when I come and visit we can all be together, and I know she’d be well taken care of. Please?”

Zach saw how the pain in his friend’s eyes was washed over with this idea, and he wanted desperately to keep the sadness from coming back. If he were to take Sadie, he knew Brandon would be grateful forever. But what about the care involved with having a snake? Zach knows that Sadie requires a lot of special attention— including feeding, cleaning her cage, and purchasing supplies— but is not sure he can care for her by himself. But if he takes Sadie, Zach knows how grateful his friend would be. What should Zach do?



Poor Zach! It is difficult to have a good friend move away. But today with email, instant messaging, and cell phones it is easier than ever to keep in touch with people far away. Zach can’t get all caught up in emotions right now, though. He is wise not to jump at the opportunity to take Sadie. She would surely be a great pet, but Zach should take a little time to think this through and discuss the situation with his parents. He needs to make sure his decision is a sound one, using not only his heart but also his head.

The MSPCA believes native and exotic wild animals, frequently acquired solely because they are unusual pets, require special care from knowledgeable guardians. Many people who take on these animals aren’t prepared to provide for the animal’s physical and behavioral needs, resulting in trauma to the animal and potential danger to people and other animals. Additionally, many of these animals

are still obtained in the wild and suffer much distress from capture, confinement, and transport. The MSPCA sees many exotic pets—including reptiles, amphibians, birds, and small mammals—surrendered. Many have suffered negligence and abuse, while other surrenders are from guardians who simply grew tired of caring for high-maintenance and often long-living pets. As you can imagine, it is not always easy to find new guardians for animals with so many specific needs.

Zach knows from watching Brandon and his ball python, Sadie, that snakes require a lot of special attention. Her glass front terrarium is about three by two feet and has a tight fitting mesh lid on top with a florescent light. The bottom is freshly lined every week with either cypress mulch or newspapers. A good sized hollow log inside provides Sadie with a place in which she can hide, and a sturdy branch allows her to get closer to the warm light. Temperatures are very important for reptiles, and Sadie's terrarium needs to be kept between 80 and 85 degrees during the day and, at night, between 70 and 75 degrees. She also needs a clean pool of water every day in which she can soak. And then, there is the matter of food; Sadie is a carnivore—her diet is strictly composed of meat. Adult ball pythons eat mice, which should be purchased at pet supply stores once a week. That is a lot of care for an animal who can live to be 20 to 30 years old!

Reviewing all of Sadie's care with his parents is a good idea for Zach. They will be able to help him realistically sort through his feelings for Brandon and Sadie and assist him in making a good decision. Good friends will understand and respect a well-thought out decision. If Zach decides not to take Sadie, perhaps he can help Brandon find a great home for his snake by speaking to someone at a local herpetological society, one that specializes in snakes, or the MSPCA. He understands all that is involved in making a decision in his best interest as well as in Sadie's.