
Pern & the Responsible Pet Owner

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Humans, it seems, love companionship, and not just from others of their own kind. Many of us enjoy owning pets of some variety and it seems natural to us to pass this trait on to our Pernese characters. But just how easy and convenient is pet ownership on Pern?

A pet can be defined as an animal kept mainly (though perhaps not exclusively) because its owner likes having it there. Pets are companions, friends; in some cases they can even be child substitutes for their owners. On Earth, the difference between an animal kept as a pet and an animal that is expected to work for its living is often very obvious, at least in Western Culture where aesthetic (to some!) but otherwise helpless and useless breeds have been bred for generations. A whole industry has grown up around these animals - they have specially made foodstuffs, toys, bedding, even fashion accessories.... On Pern, the realities of pet ownership are likely to be somewhat different.

Working animals are the norm in Pernese society, and the average Pernese is extremely unsentimental about them. Runners (horses), hummers (llama) and various types of herdbeast (cattle) provide transport for people and goods, and help to plough the fields. Cats catch vermin; dogs hunt alongside their masters and can be used in the kitchens as a ready source of muscle-power. Watchwhers guard and protect the homes of their owners. Firelizards are of great use in hunting and controlling tunnelsnakes and crawlers. A wide range of animals provide meat. In the cotholds that house the majority of the Pernese population, there is no place for any creature that cannot earn its keep -- it rapidly becomes a drain on often scarce resources. Humans being what they are, however, there are always going to be exceptions to this rule...

Although there are no species or breeds that have been bred exclusively as pets, there are plenty of potential candidates to be found among the working creatures of Pern. Amongst the cats and dogs that frequent human habitations, people are going to find favorites to adopt, just as they do on Earth. Runners may become favored mounts, petted and pampered by their owners far beyond their useful Turns. Children will undoubtedly adopt piglets and longears (rabbits) and fight to keep them from the cooking pot. Small wherries may be kept in cages to provide color and song (if you don't mind your canary having little forepaws and, possibly, teeth!). Even some types of tunnelsnake may be kept -- they're not so different in principle to the rats, mice and ferrets that are popular pets today (I currently have pet

mice). Firelizards, of course, abound and their empathic bonding gives them a great advantage in becoming much-loved companions.

So, you have your pets. But how does the responsible Pernese pet owner go about caring for them?

Assuming that you can find somewhere to keep them (easier for the more itinerant creatures than for aged runners and other larger beasts), the most immediate problem is feeding. No manufactured kitty chow here! Herbivores are generally less of a problem than carnivores, but the most common pets - cats, dogs and firelizards, are all carnivorous and will be expected to find their own food by hunting tunnelsnakes and crawlers; scraps from the table may supplement this (other kitchen scraps being reserved for the animals that actually work there). So your characters can expect to find chewed up vermin around their quarters, and to have to treat their pets for occasional bites and stings -- the local beasthealer will probably not be amused to have to patch up every nip and scratch on someone's beloved Fido!

And then there's grooming. Pernese pets probably regard this in much the same way as their Terran counterparts; some enjoy it but more regard the brush and bath with deep suspicion. But some things have to be done to remove smelly encrusted additions to fur coats and your characters can expect to have the traditional soapy battle on their hands! Firelizards at least like water and are thankfully non-furred, but they often demand oiling, especially when growing. The lack of oil would probably not do them lasting harm as it would to a dragon -- after all, wild firelizards manage very well without any form of oil -- but they'll never let you believe it....

Another problem is breeding. Not getting them to do it, but getting them to stop! With firelizards, both greens and golds lay eggs and can produce clutches twice a Turn. Here, the green habit of neglecting clutches means that most domestic-bred eggs are eaten by tunnelsnakes and wherries (and hungry cats and dogs!), helping to avoid much of the problem, but gold clutches can be large, even if getting smaller with the end of the Pass - and getting rid of all of the eggs may be difficult. They can be used in trade (if you can get the gold to part with them) but sometimes it may be necessary to destroy or abandon some eggs. After all, not everybody wants a 'lizard....

If firelizard breeding is a problem, then it's several times worse with cats and dogs! Male animals may be neutered fairly easily, given the right equipment (fellis, numbweed and a knife) and a non-squeamish owner, but at the current level of Pernese technology, females must be left intact. Given the breeding rate of domestic cats and dogs, and the age at which they may begin to have young of their own, this will very quickly become a problem! To avoid having packs of feral animals roaming the Hold or Weyr, it will be necessary to get rid of any unwanted young as soon as possible. The idea of drowning or otherwise disposing of kittens and puppies is not a welcome one in this day and age, but it was a common practice in the past and the practical Pernese, faced with the same problems as our

predecessors, will probably do so without much hesitation (or at least face the fact that they'd better find someone who will do it for them). Pet tunnelsnakes and wherries will pose similar problems, but nobody will worry too much about disposing of their eggs....

I could go on about the joys of finding bedding and the even greater joys of housetraining - dedicated kitty litter being as rare as dedicated kitty chow! Firelizards may be able to take their waste products elsewhere (at least, your character had better train them to or the result could be unpleasant. As Terry Pratchett once said during a convention talk, "Show me a man with a firelizard on his shoulder and I'll show you a man with dragonshit down his back....") but other animals may have more of a problem. And scent marking inside a Hold is not likely to make your pet popular....

So, do you still want those pets? Sure that your characters can't just be content in occasionally patting a kitchen canine? Firelizards are probably the easiest creatures to keep, but even they require a lot of care and attention; cats, dogs and other creatures can be a major bind if they are to be cared for properly. If you still want your character to have an animal companion despite the work and the drawbacks, then good luck with them! Hopefully, they'll be worth the effort....