

# LEAPING LIZARDS!

They don't require litter boxes or long walks, don't trigger pet allergies, and don't yelp long into the night. No wonder reptiles



are gaining popularity. **BY MADELINE BODIN** PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSH CAMPBELL

**KATI WRUBEL DOES NOT HAVE TIME TO SIT DOWN. THERE** is a crowd of people three-deep around her Kati's Cresteds table at the New England Reptile Expo. Those in the back crane their necks for a look at the geckos in tall plastic containers arrayed on the table in front of Wrubel.

A tawny-colored crested gecko named Sammi crouches her 4-inch-long body and equally long tail atop the container in the center. Geckos, a type of lizard, always look as though they are crouching. A tiny fringe around the edge of this gecko's flat head is her "crest." Every once in a while Sammi reaches out with her long tongue and licks her own eyeball. She cannot blink, so this is how she keeps her eyes clean.

A boy in a yellow polo shirt wriggles his way to the front. He wants Wrubel to know that he has a ball python at home. With a smile, she offers him Sammi to hold. "They are so soft," he coos. "The feet kind of stick to you." He sighs. "I love reptiles."

The New England Reptile Expo is the region's largest. It takes place each April and October in a brick-walled former armory in Manchester, New Hampshire, now part of the Radisson Hotel. On this day in April, it has drawn about 40 vendors and 2,300 attendees. When the show officially opens at 10 a.m., nearly every exhibit is as crowded as Wrubel's. Walking the aisles requires the same skills as navigating a T station at rush hour. The reptiles for sale include lizards, snakes, and turtles. Several vendors sell the most popular reptile pets, particularly ball pythons, corn snakes, and bearded dragons. (There is also a large selection of frogs, which are amphibians.) There are fruit eaters, leaf eaters, and carnivores. There are desert natives that need dry conditions and rain-forest dwellers that need humidity. Many are happy in a glass tank, but some, such as chameleons, do better in a screen cage. Many reptile species don't need to be fed daily, and a few go weeks without eating. Reptiles live as long as dogs or cats, and some live much longer. A bearded dragon lives about 10 years; a corn snake, 15. Tortoises can live a hundred years.

The popularity of reptiles as pets is exploding. In 2006, 4.8 million households in the United States owned 13 million reptiles, according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association. That's double the 2.4 million households that owned reptiles in 1996. That growing popularity is reflected in the reptile show. Former vendor Jerry Toohil of Worcester has not been at a show for five years. He's back today as an attendee

and can't get over the crowds, and how the crowds have changed. "It used to be all tattooed biker people dressed in black," he says. "Now it's normal people, too."

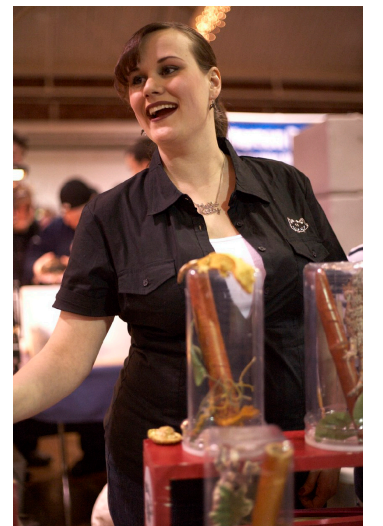
**REPTILE EXPERTS SAY THE GROWING** popularity of these cold-blooded pets may be due to the fact that some species are low-maintenance, that they are ideal apartment pets (Wrubel sells many geckos to Boston's apartment-dwelling college students), and that they are good for people with allergies (Wrubel herself is allergic to cats). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warns that children younger than 5 and people with weakened immune systems should avoid reptiles because of the threat of salmonella infection (a version of this warning is posted at the reptile expo entrance), but showgoers don't seem scared off by this. There are bottles of hand sanitizer at many displays, and Wrubel, for one, uses hers periodically.

The aisles of the reptile show are filled with people who own dozens of reptiles. And they have dogs and cats and tanks of fish. They will tell you that they love *all* animals. Perhaps a generation of environmental consciousness-raising has trained our pet-mad culture to embrace a wider range of creatures as cute and lovable. It is also possible that moms are getting cooler, or at least more indulgent. It may be no surprise that the minivan generation is not only saying yes to a reptile as a pet, but will also do what it takes to make reptile ownership work for the kids.

A blond woman in a black track suit appears at the edge of the crowd at Wrubel's table, herding her two sons in front of her. "These are crested geckos," she says. "That's just what you are looking for."

Wrubel, 31, who lives in Worcester and is a postdoctoral fellow at the Tufts University Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine in Grafton, has just 14 geckos for sale at her table. Her manicured fingertips dance over the biggest geckos in the tallest containers in the table's center. "These are my breeders," she says. "It's a slow time of year. I'm just getting eggs, so I want to show people what I'm working with."

The geckos that hatch from those eggs will be available in three to six months. Many of Wrubel's customers wait that long, but Stephany Kalil of Bedford, New Hampshire, and her family, sons Xander, then age 12, and Adam, age 9, and husband, Steve, intend to go home with a crested gecko for each boy today. Kalil has been doing research on reptiles as pets and knows that crest-



**ANIMAL ATTRACTION** At the New England Reptile Expo in April, shoppers like Crystal Moore inspect the goods (top), while sellers like Kati Wrubel (above) extol the virtues of cold-blooded pets. Facing page: A monitor lizard gives potential buyers a closer look.



**COLOR FORMS**  
Expo finds include (from left) a panther chameleon, albino Honduran milk snakes, and a dalmatian crested gecko. Below: Zoe Beyer doesn't fear ball pythons, among the most popular reptile pets.



ed geckos are both relatively cuddly and easy to care for and that reptile shows like this one are a great place to buy them.

The Kalil family heads over to a vendor with a large selection of crested geckos. There, the geckos are displayed in clear, round deli takeout containers. There are air holes punched in the sides. Adam picks out a thumb-sized brown-and-tan striped crested gecko that costs \$75. Xander picks out an orange-tinged gecko that, he is told, will develop black spots as it matures. The spots cost extra. This gecko is \$95. Steve Kalil feathers bills out of his wallet. The boys hold their takeout containers reverently as they turn from the table.

The Kalils are then on to a vendor specializing in tanks and accessories. They settle on a 45-gallon tank, then gather up an armful of plastic plants. "I'm getting fake so I can clean it in the sink," confesses Stephany. "We can build an ecosystem later." They also buy a little log, which the tree-dwelling geckos need to feel at home.

As Steve, laden with the tank in a box, and the boys with their geckos head for the car, Stephany searches for a vendor willing to sell her a small quantity of live crickets. She finds one on her third try. On her way out, Stephany skirts the crowd still gathered around Kati Wrubel's table.

The crowd thins out at about 3 p.m., and Wrubel takes stock of her day. She has sold nine geckos and talked to two pet-shop owners who are interested in buying geckos from her. She also has probably sold the idea of having a crested gecko as a pet to dozens of people who will buy later through her website or other reptile shows. To celebrate, she and her 13-year-old daughter, Eve, will stop for a nice dinner on their way home.

One of the last families to visit Wrubel's table is a mom in a brick-red cardigan, a buzz-cut dad, and their two wide-eyed, preschool-aged daughters. The girls are eager to hold Sammi, but it's the mom who returns the gecko to her perch atop the containers – with a tiny kiss. ■

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**VIDEO**  
Learn about Kati Wrubel's crested gecko-breeding operation.



## Pet Sounds

*Is there a psychological explanation for perfectly sane people singing to their animal friends?* **BY ROBIN ABRAHAMS**

**"OOMPA LOOMPA HIGGEDY HOG**  
You are a small and excellent dog.  
Oompa Loompa hoggedy hig  
You are a dog who's not very big."

It had been years since Willy Wonka's miniature workforce had come to mind. And yet just a few days after Milo, a high-octane terrier mix, entered our household, I was Oompa-Loomping at him with gusto. Soon, my musical repertoire expanded, as I adapted lyrics by REM, Talking Heads, Amy Winehouse, and Monty Python ("Oh he's a Milo dog and he's OK/He sleeps all night and he poops all day").

Was I out of my mind? Milo seemed to think so, as do about half of my pet-owning friends. Confess to people that you sing to your pet, and you will get one of two responses: "You . . . sing to your dog, do you?" as they edge slowly away, or a joyously relieved "I thought I was the only person who did that!" – sometimes accompanied by a full-throated rendition of their favorite pet song. Google the phrase "sing to" and either "cat" or "dog," and you'll find just how many pet singers are out there and how utterly delighted they are when they find one another. Reactions from the pets themselves are more mixed. Milo is indifferent, but some folks – especially cat owners – swear that their pets will tail-twitch along in rhythm, or even join in.

Why do we sing to our pets? Why do we have pets? A simple question turns out to be a veritable Russian doll of odd behaviors nested inside one another. Music is one of the most basic of human

activities, yet psychologists still argue over why we invented it and why it has an almost mystical power to draw groups together (from monks chanting plainsong to a techno rave). Why do we love our pets? From a Darwinian perspective, it hardly makes sense to lavish attention and resources on another species. Is today's pet-keeping merely a decadent holdover from a time when cats and dogs had utilitarian value – killing rats, pulling sleds, rescuing Timmy? Or did "survival of the cutest" result in the big-eyed, large-headed, irresistible pets of today that evoke our deepest caretaking instincts?

Because it seems we sing to our pets for the same reason we sing to babies – whatever that is. My informal survey suggests that pet singers were themselves sung to a great deal as children. Long ago, deep in our infant brains, a program got installed saying "Small helpless cute entity → sing to it." And sing we do, like manic cruise-ship entertainers, even when our pets gaze back at us with expressions of ennui, clearly thinking, "Less theater. More dinner." ■

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**VIDEO**  
Have you captured yourself singing to your pet? Submit your video file, and we'll post the best online.

who have not changed their four-legged friend's food to a less expensive brand.