

Exotic to mainstream: Australians wild about unusual pets

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Olivia Fitzer holds a stick insect at a pet store in Sydney

The proud owner of dingo 'Kimba', James Bornstein, is part of the new wave of Australian exotic pet lovers whose unconventional companions are growing in popularity.

In a country known for its unusual wildlife, Bornstein says having a subspecies of the grey wolf in his Sydney home is an opportunity to change

people's negative perceptions about the native wild dog and apex predator.

"Dingoes are so intelligent. We want people to see her (Kimba) and realise they are not vicious animals, they are just like normal dogs," he told AFP.

Dingoes are infamous thanks to the dramatic case of Azaria Chamberlain—a nine-week-old baby snatched by one of the animals during a camping trip in central Australia in 1980, which was made into a movie.

Bornstein hopes his efforts will increase support for conservation, as dingo numbers decline amid habitat loss and cross-breeding with domestic dogs.

His views are echoed by Ben Dessen, reptile manager at Kellyville Pets store in Sydney, who owned his first snake at just six.

"Now we see every six-year-old that we set up with their first reptile—hopefully they want to go on and protect animals and have an appreciation for how amazing these creatures are," he says.



Brooke Winters with her pet "Mario", a bearded dragon

According to the Australian Veterinary Association, exotic pets are becoming "more and more popular", with residents owning millions of birds, fish, small mammals and reptiles.

Ernie Chan, a breeder who has kept up to 130 reptiles, says shrinking homes and urbanisation has seen potential owners turn to smaller pets that require less maintenance.

"You don't need to take a snake for a walk," Chan says. "Everybody's had dogs and cats for so many years and it's kind of reptiles' time to shine."

Brooke Winters is another exotic pet convert in a nation famous for koalas, kangaroos and wombats.

"I grew up with Steve Irwin as my idol, so pretty much everything that he did I just wanted to mimic," Winters said at Macarthur Pets, a large pet store in Sydney that she manages.



Ann Harris playing with her pet Australian miniature pig "Coco" on her property on the outskirts of Sydney

"I just feel like people don't appreciate (reptiles) enough and treat them very differently just because they don't have fur."

"Crocodile Hunter" Irwin was a world-renowned conservationist whose stunts with dangerous animals drew attention to wildlife Down Under before his death a decade ago.

Despite their growing popularity, there are strict laws across Australia governing what exotic creatures can be kept as pets.

Even so, welfare officials warn of backyard breeders or buying an animal that may have been grabbed from the wild.

"Those animals can have really special needs and even if they have been bred in captivity, they are generally wild animals with long histories of living in particular environments," RSPCA Australia's Jane Speechley adds.

"They don't necessarily adapt very well to being kept as companion [animals](#)."



Four year-old Sammi Smith carrying Fideo, a three-year-old male albino ferret

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