

## Sugar Gliders

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff



Sugar gliders are marsupials that are native to eastern Australia, Papua New Guinea and parts of Indonesia. These nocturnal pets love to climb, jump and glide. A membrane called a patagium stretches from their wrists to their ankles and allows them to glide, and they use their long tails to steer in mid-air. Sugar gliders are very sociable animals that crave companionship, whether that is with you or other sugar gliders. Though they do best when housed with other sugar gliders, it is possible to own just a single sugar glider if you purchase him at a young age and spend a lot of time bonding with him. If you are willing to put in the time and effort with your sugar glider, he will make a wonderful pet.

### INTERESTING FACTS

**Characteristics:** Sugar gliders are actually small gliding opossums in the family Petauridae. An adult sugar glider's head and body measure about 5 to 6 inches, with the tail being the same length. An adult sugar glider usually weighs less than 4 ounces. They are known for having large, dark eyes and large ears. Males reach maturity at about 9 to 10 months of age, and females mature shortly thereafter. The average captive life span of a sugar glider can be 10 to 15 years, though they live about half as long in the wild. Sugar gliders should be kept in groups (called colonies) as they are very social animals. Sugar gliders in captivity breed up to four times a year, so if you have a group, make sure that the males are neutered to prevent accidental litters. Sugar gliders can be very vocal at night when they are awake, with sounds ranging from chirping to almost barking. There is a very distinct buzzing noise they make when they are disturbed in their nest that is called "crabbing."

**Appearance:** Sugar gliders' coats are generally gray with a black stripe extending from the top of their head down the full length of the body. They have black markings on their face, legs and back as well. The last couple inches of their tails are usually black. Like other members of their order, the second and third toes on their feet are fused, but the claws are separate. Sugar gliders use these fused toes as a grooming comb. Their hind feet also have a large, opposable big toe to help them climb and grip branches.

**#1 Preventable Health Problem:** Sugar gliders are exotic pets, and they have an exotic diet. They don't get all the nutrients they need just with kibble, and when a sugar glider doesn't get the right balance of nutrients, particularly a proper ratio of calcium to phosphorus, he can develop a metabolic bone disease known as nutritional osteodystrophy. This can be prevented by feeding a proper, well-balanced [diet](#) and supplementing your sugar glider's daily diet with vitamins and minerals.

**Preferences:** As mentioned above, sugar gliders are very social animals. They will thrive better if kept in pairs or groups, but if you only have one, you can form a very close bond with him. However, if the sugar glider you bring home isn't tame, it can take a while to socialize them to the point where they are cuddly. Tame sugar gliders are usually quite content to sleep in their owner's pocket or between two shirts during the day. Since they will spend a lot of time near the top of their [cage](#), they like their toys to be up there. They will only like an [exercise wheel](#) if it is introduced when they are very young.

**Best Features:** Sugar gliders are clean, adorable, friendly and relatively quiet during the day. They make great pets, especially when you are able to bond with them.

**Housing:** Because sugar gliders are such great climbers and need room to glide, you must provide a [cage](#) with a lot of vertical space. The more sugar gliders you own, the more space the cage will need to have. Sugar gliders are small, so the wire spacing of the cage should be no more than 1/2" by 1". Many sugar gliders will be able to figure out a simple latch, so make sure that all cage latches are secure, even if that means using additional [cage locks](#). The cage must have a number of platforms, shelves and branches for climbing and gliding. It should be placed out of direct sunlight in a room without drafts. Sugar gliders need at least one nest box in their cage, and it should be placed as close to the top as possible. In addition to lots of climbing spots, the cage should contain small plastic food dishes that attach to the side of the cage, fabric bedding material (frequently checked for pulls or loose threads), and a layer of shavings on the bottom. The cage must be cleaned no less than once a week.

**Diet:** Sugar gliders are omnivores, meaning that they eat both plant material and meat. They have a very exotic diet, and there is no easy way to make sure that your glider gets the nutrients he needs. What constitutes an ideal diet is actually still under debate, so this is a topic that you will want to discuss in depth with a veterinarian who treats sugar gliders. The main components of a sugar glider's diet are fruit, veggies and a [pelleted dry food](#) that is either meat or insect based. You can also supplement your glider's diet with pinky mice and gut-loaded live insects, as sugar gliders in the wild would eat insects, small birds, and other small prey animals.