

# Care of the Pet Sugar Glider

Sugar gliders (*Petaurus breviceps*) are small, nocturnal marsupials native to Australia and New Guinea. Sugar gliders are affectionate and very intelligent, and can make an excellent pet for the right family. Sugar gliders are nocturnal animals that have large eyes for superior night vision. Sugar gliders possess a furred web of skin or gliding membrane, which runs along each side of the body from the wrist to the ankle. Males average in weight between 115-160 grams (4-6 oz), while females are smaller at 95-135 grams (3-5 oz). Average lifespan ranges between 8-13 years. At sexual maturity males develop a scent gland on the top of their head used in marking females and their territory.

## Diet

Providing the proper nutrition is a very important aspect of keeping your glider happy and healthy. Fresh food should be offered daily at a maximum of 15-25% of the sugar glider's body weight. In the wild, gliders feast on a combination of insects, pollen, nectar, and acacia gum, and eucalyptus sap. In captivity, these animals need a variety of foods to meet their nutritional needs.

- Approximately 40-50% of the diet should be protein-based. Good sources of protein include crickets, mealworms, hard boiled eggs, pinky mice, commercial sugar glider diets, and monkey chow low in iron and vitamin D. Administer a calcium supplement and a multivitamin one to two times weekly.
- Chopped up fruits, leafy vegetables, and sugar-free, preservative-free juices should make up no more than 10-15% of the diet. Gliders enjoy a wide variety of fruits including orange, watermelon, pear, kiwi, apricot, berries, banana, apple, mango, grapes, melon, and figs.
- The remaining portion of the diet should be nectar and sap-type foods such as Nekton-Lori<sup>®</sup> or Gliderade<sup>®</sup>. These items can be supplied in a sipper bottle or bowl anchored to the side of the cage.
- Leadbeater's formula (*see below*) was originally developed by an Australian zoo as part of an extensive, varied diet for captive sugar gliders. There are many different recipes involving Leadbeater's mix, however when the product is refrigerated or frozen vitamins lose some potency. Therefore Leadbeater's formula should only be offered as a supplement to the main diet. Ideally the bulk of the diet should be based on fresh foods.

### Leadbeater's formula

- 150 ml warm water
- 150 ml honey
- 1 shelled hard-boiled egg
- 25 grams high protein baby cereal
- 1 tsp vitamin/mineral supplement

Mix warm water and honey. Blend egg until homogenized in a separate container. Gradually add honey/water then vitamin/mineral supplement, then baby cereal. Blend after each addition until smooth.

Clean, fresh water should be available at all times. Water bottles should be placed so they are easily accessible. Change water bottles daily.

## Housing

Sugar gliders need ample space to climb, jump, and glide, so it is important to provide the largest cage possible. A tall cage is better than a wide one. The cage should be made of galvanized steel with bars no wider than ¼ inch to prevent escape. Avoid screen-type mesh, as claws tend to catch in the squares. Glass aquariums do not work for gliders since they are unable to hold on to the sides and move about normally. Make sure at least part

of the cage is at eye level since gliders need at least the illusion of height. Sugar gliders do well at room temperatures between 18-24°C (65-75°F). Place the cage out of the path of drafts, and away from direct sunlight and heating sources. The cage should also not be placed in the path of constant daytime traffic, as this will disturb the sugar glider's nocturnal sleep pattern.

- Provide several nesting boxes for sleeping and hiding throughout the cage. Wood, plastic, and wicker all work well. A cloth pouch with a slit cut in the front can also be anchored to the side of the cage. A soft washcloth or sock may serve ideal bedding within the nest box. Shredded paper or aspen shavings also work, but frequent changing is required. Avoid cedar shavings as these predispose to respiratory and skin problems.
- Branches and ropes for climbing/perching should also be positioned vertically and horizontally throughout the cage. Perches must be made of non-toxic materials such as elm, oak or hickory as your glider will chew on them.
- A variety of toys should also be provided such as bird toy ladders and hanging toys which are glider favorites, but make sure there is nowhere for little feet to get caught. Changing the type and location of the toys every couple of months will add variety to your glider's environment. Your glider may also enjoy a solid wheel exercise wheel.
- Sugar gliders are social animals that do well housed in pairs or groups as long as the cage space is adequate. Both single sex and mixed groups are known to do well together.

Spot clean the cage daily. Nest boxes should be cleaned out at least twice a week. The cage, including all cage furniture and toys, should be thoroughly cleaned weekly with a disinfectant.

## **Handling**

Sugar gliders are gregarious, outgoing creatures that bond well with humans. Make sure to spend lots of quality time with your glider. Since gliders are nocturnal, plan on spending time playing with them in the evenings. When initially picking up a glider, support the entire body by cupping it in the palm of your hand. Carry them around on your shoulder, or in a fanny pack type sack. Gliders are very quick and love to climb on top of your head so be prepared when taking them out. They also love to jump onto other people or objects in the vicinity, so be aware. During the day they are content to just curl up in your shirt pocket.

Frightened gliders will make a funny sound called "crabbing", if you hear this make sure to go slowly and use a soothing voice. While gliders do not tend to bite, they are capable of doing so. Gliders also possess very sharp claws.

## **References**

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