



Something to **WHEEK** About

With proper care, guinea pigs reveal delightful personalities

by RUTHANNE JOHNSON

If you don't know what “popcorning,” “wheeking,” and “rumblestrutting” mean, you haven't spent enough time with guinea pigs.

But after sharing her home with these domestic cousins of the Andean wild cavy for nearly 14 years, Shannon Cauthen can tell you all about their endearing antics.

When guinea pigs are happy and excited, they kick up their heels and toss their heads like tiny bucking broncos as they race around their cage. This is known as popcorning. A cavy feeling bold may rumblestrut—combining a purring noise with a rear waggle to show dominance. Wheeking—a loud squeal signaling pleasure, unhappiness, or a request for a treat—is just one of at least nine distinct

sounds guinea pigs use to express their needs and emotions.

“The communication they have with each other is just amazing,” says Cauthen, who founded the Colorado-based rescue group Cavy Care. “... They develop little individual friendships and then [will] defend their friend if there is another guinea pig who is causing problems. They are very dedicated to each other.”

Guinea pigs also have a playful streak: Bells, mirrors, and hay-stuffed slitted bags are popular toys, and some of Cauthen's piggies even enjoy games of fetch.

Sadly, some guinea pig owners never see their pets' fun-loving side. Guinea pigs' habitat, diet, and social life play an important role in their physical and mental

well-being; as prey animals, they need to feel safe and comfortable for their personalities to blossom. Yet many people mistake them for easy-to-manage “starter pets” for children, and many pet stores sell inappropriate cages, food, and toys, says rescuer Teresa Murphy, founder of Cavy Spirit in San Mateo, Calif. The common result: a stressed, fearful animal; children quickly bored with their new companion; and parents unwilling to pick up the slack for the next five to seven years, which is guinea pigs' average lifespan.

Murphy is all too familiar with the scenario: Most of the animals surrendered to Cavy Spirit “are from people who got the guinea pig for their kids, and the kids are no longer taking care of them,” she

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To provide your guinea pigs with the best possible care, follow these tips

► **FINDING THE PERFECT PIGGIES** Adopt from a local animal shelter or rescue. Guinea pigs at pet stores may come from breeding mills or backyard breeders and may be pregnant or sick, says Cavy Spirit's Teresa Murphy. "And frequently, their behavior is a bit crazy because they have been through so much." An experienced shelter employee or rescuer can correctly identify the animals' gender and provide advice about personalities, medical needs, caging, diet, small mammal veterinarians, and any post-adoption issues.

► **CAVY CLIQUES** Guinea pigs need companions of their own kind but can be selective about their friends. Washington, D.C.-based Metropolitan Guinea Pig Rescue hosts adoption meets, a kind of "speed dating" for guinea pigs, says volunteer Steve Conard. "Ninety-five percent of the time ... from the second they get home, they get along perfectly." Spaying and neutering prevents reproduction and can lessen the risk of cancer and other health problems; the spay surgery is complicated and should be performed only by a cavy-savvy veterinarian.

► **POSH PAD** Cages sold in pet stores are simply too small—each guinea pig pair needs a minimum of 7.5 square feet measured at the base—and wire bottoms can cause foot and leg injuries. Frustrated by the shortcomings of commercial cages, Murphy designed the popular Cubes & Coroplast (C&C) habitats. You can purchase one through most rescue groups or make your own (see guineapigcages.com for details); for safety, cube grids should be 9x9 and not the more commonly sold 8x8. Place the cage in a safe area with a temperature between 65 and 75 degrees, away from strong heat sources or drafts.

► **THIS LITTLE PIGGY STAYED HOME** Cages should be interesting and comfortable, as guinea pigs spend most of their lives there. Use paper-based bedding, aspen shavings, or fleece and towels;

avoid toxic cedar and pine, unless the latter is kiln-dried. Guinea pigs should never have exercise wheels, but smooth-surfaced ramps, tunnels, and a variety of toys will keep them entertained and active. To ensure a healthy habitat, perform daily spot cleanings, and scrub the cage and change all bedding once a week.

► **AT THE TROUGH** Adult guinea pigs need constant access to fresh timothy and/or orchard hay, which provide fiber and help wear down their continually growing teeth. For vitamin C, give each pig 1 cup of veggies and 1/8 cup of vitamin C-fortified pellets per day; avoid pellets with colored pieces. (Fruits and some vegetables should only be fed sparingly to prevent obesity, tooth decay, and stomach upset.) Use ceramic food dishes instead of plastic, and provide at least two 32-ounce water bottles (the type with a ball bearing in the spout) with fresh water daily.

► **IN THE PINK** Typical of prey animals, guinea pigs are "masters at hiding their illnesses," says Conard. Take them to the vet at least once a year, and be attentive to changes in appearance and behavior. To keep on top of his pigs' health, Conard weighs them weekly. "As soon as they get ill, they can easily drop 10 percent of their body weight in a week," he says. Proper housing, food, fresh water, and daily floor time will also go a long way to preventing health problems.

► **LAP PIGGIES** Building a trust bond with your cavy "takes a lot of practice and patience and going slowly," says Murphy. Pick them up gently and support their chest and hindquarters, rather than scooping them up around the middle. Improper handling can result in serious injuries, so always supervise children around your guinea pigs.

► **LEARN MORE** about Teresa Murphy's crusade to improve the treatment of guinea pigs, watch a video on guinea pig care, and read about their diet at humanesociety.org/allanimals.

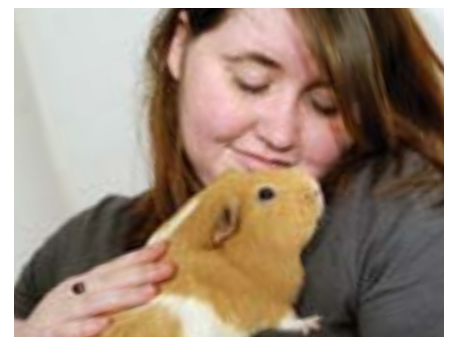
says. Shelters and rescue groups across the country speak of the neglected, withdrawn covies living alone in small cages. The classroom pets with heatstroke or broken limbs. The animals found in dumpsters, abandoned cars, or even wandering loose outdoors, where they stand out like a neon sign advertising "come and get it" to hungry predators, says Murphy.

One adoption at a time, devotees are working to change the mindset that covies are disposable. Cauthen encourages people to lend a hand at Cavy Care's sanctuary, offering a free adoption in exchange for 10 volunteer stints. And she encourages the

entire family to get involved, making sure the parents are "just as excited as the kids."

Murphy has potential adopters help clean cages as well as feed and handle her foster animals. "I've had people say, 'Well, that's too much work,' or the kid goes, 'Eew!' So it's better to know what you are getting into than getting rid of the animal later on."

For the people who learn to appreciate the species' charms and provide top-notch care, the animals have special ways of expressing their gratitude—such as by "barbering," the term for when a guinea pig chews off a piece of hair



from a beloved friend.

"That's a sign of affection," says Cauthen. "... That's happened to a couple of clients."