How Reptiles Became Popular Pets

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Reptiles were not always welcome in people’s homes. For most of history, if someone had announced that they kept a snake in the living room, the reaction would not have been “What morph is it?” It would have been “Where is it?!” followed by the sound of fast retreating footsteps.

For centuries, reptiles were surrounded by fear, superstition, and misunderstanding. Snakes were often linked to danger or evil, lizards were seen as strange and unsettling, and large tortoises were mostly admired from a safe distance. Today, however, reptiles are firmly established in the pet world.

Corn snakes, leopard geckos, bearded dragons, and tortoises are now common companions in homes around the world. The journey from feared creatures to beloved pets is a story shaped by science, culture, technology, and a growing appreciation for animals that do not wag their tails.

From Symbols to Specimens

In ancient times, reptiles were rarely kept as pets in the modern sense. Some civilizations admired them or even worshipped them. Ancient Egyptians, for example, associated cobras with power and protection, while many cultures saw snakes as symbols of mystery, danger, or rebirth. Still, very few people were keeping an iguana in a decorated enclosure and taking it out to impress the neighbours.

The first real change came during the 18th and 19th centuries with the rise of natural history. European explorers and scientists travelled around the world and returned with strange animals, including reptiles from Africa, Asia, and the Americas. These animals fascinated the public and helped spark the development of herpetology, the study of reptiles and amphibians.

Scientists and collectors began keeping reptiles in zoos, museums, and private collections. Most of these early efforts were unsuccessful because people knew very little about what reptiles actually needed. A tropical lizard placed in a cold room with a bowl of lettuce had roughly the same survival prospects as a severely depressed lemming.

The Mid-20th Century: Reptiles Move In

The real rise of reptiles as pets began after the Second World War. By the 1950s and 1960s, improvements in air travel and international trade made it much easier to transport exotic animals around the world. Reptiles that had once only been seen in zoos could now be purchased through pet shops and specialist dealers.

At the same time, people began learning more about reptile care. Hobbyists discovered that reptiles needed specific temperatures, lighting, humidity, and diets to stay healthy. Heat lamps, thermostats, and specially designed enclosures became more common.

This was the beginning of reptile husbandry as we know it today. Early keepers experimented with different setups, often learning through trial and error. Unfortunately, the reptiles involved sometimes suffered from that “error” part.

The Boom of the 1970s and 1980s

By the 1970s and 1980s, reptiles had become popular alternative pets. Species such as the corn snake, green iguana, and leopard gecko began appearing more frequently in pet shops.

The corn snake became especially important. Unlike many snakes, it was calm, relatively easy to care for, and usually willing to tolerate humans with only minimal complaints. Corn snakes helped many people overcome their fear of snakes and proved that reptiles could make rewarding pets.

The green iguana also became hugely popular during the 1980s, partly because baby iguanas were cheap and widely available. Unfortunately, many people bought them without realising that those small green lizards could grow up to 6 feet long, develop powerful tails, claws for climbing anything (including people) and require large, expensive enclosures. Quite a few owners discovered too late that they had not bought a “cute little lizard” so much as a mildly annoyed green dinosaur.

Leopard geckos became another turning point. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, breeders had begun producing them in captivity with great success. They were small, hardy, easy to feed, and did not require special ultraviolet lighting like many other reptiles (this has since been proven wrong). For beginners, they quickly became one of the best choices available.

The Captive Breeding Revolution

One of the most important changes in reptile keeping came with the rise of captive breeding in the 1980s and 1990s. Before that, most reptiles sold as pets were wild caught. Animals were taken from their natural habitats, shipped long distances, and often arrived stressed, sick, or injured.

Captive breeding changed everything.

Breeders learned how to reproduce species such as corn snakes, royal pythons, leopard geckos, and bearded dragons in captivity. By the late 1990s, captive-bred royal pythons and leopard geckos had become common, and by the early 2000s, captive-bred bearded dragons were widely available in Europe and North America.

Captive-bred reptiles were healthier, calmer, and better suited to life in captivity. They were also easier for beginners to handle. Most importantly, captive breeding reduced the need to remove animals from the wild.

It also created the rise of “morphs,” reptiles bred for unusual colours and patterns. Suddenly, people were not just keeping a snake—they were keeping an albino, piebald, striped, or lavender version.

Reptile enthusiasts began speaking in what sounded to outsiders like a secret language invented by very enthusiastic dragons.

The Internet Changes Everything

The internet helped reptiles become more popular than ever.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, reptile keepers began sharing information through websites and online forums. Communities formed around species-specific care, breeding, and enclosure design. New owners no longer had to rely on outdated pet shop advice such as “feed your iguana iceberg lettuce and hope for the best.”

Online forums, video tutorials, and later social media allowed keepers to compare experiences and improve their standards. A beginner in one country could now learn directly from an experienced breeder on the other side of the world.

Video platforms and social media also made reptiles more visible. People who had never seen a bearded dragon waving its arm, a gecko licking its own eyeball, or a tortoise attempting to chase a strawberry at surprising speed suddenly discovered that reptiles could be funny, intelligent, and full of personality.

Reptile Expos and Specialist Shops

As interest grew, reptile expos and specialist pet shops began appearing in greater numbers. These events gave hobbyists a chance to meet breeders, buy equipment, and learn from more experienced keepers.

A modern reptile expo can be a strange but wonderful place. One table may have tiny baby geckos, another may be selling high-tech lighting systems, and somewhere nearby there is almost certainly a person enthusiastically explaining the genetics of a snake that looks exactly like every other snake to everyone except them.

These businesses also helped improve the hobby by providing better products. Today, reptile keepers can buy advanced heating systems, ultraviolet lighting, automatic misting systems, nutritional supplements, and carefully designed enclosures made for specific species.

Why Reptiles Fit Modern Life

Part of the reason reptiles have become so popular is that they suit modern lifestyles.

Many reptiles do not need constant attention. They do not need daily walks, they are usually quiet, and they are unlikely to wake the entire neighbourhood at 5 a.m. because a squirrel had the audacity to exist.

They are also often suitable for people with allergies, and many species can live comfortably in relatively compact spaces when cared for properly.

For many owners, reptiles are appealing because they are different. A reptile does not show affection in the same way a dog or cat does, but it offers something unique. Watching a snake explore its enclosure, a gecko hunt insects, or a tortoise calmly bulldoze through the garden can be fascinating.

Modern Challenges and Responsibilities

Today, reptiles are among the most popular exotic pets in the world. However, their popularity has also created new problems.

Some species have been released into the wild by owners who could no longer care for them. In places such as Florida, released Burmese pythons have become an invasive species and caused serious environmental damage.

Illegal wildlife trade also remains a concern. Rare reptiles are sometimes collected from the wild and sold illegally, threatening already vulnerable populations.

Because of these issues, modern reptile keeping places much greater emphasis on ethical sourcing and responsible ownership. Most experienced keepers now recommend choosing captive-bred animals, researching species carefully, and avoiding impulse purchases.

In other words, before buying a reptile, it is a good idea to ask not only “Can I keep this?” but also “Will I still want this animal in ten or twenty years when it is larger, more expensive, and still entirely unconcerned by my opinion?”

Conclusion

The rise of reptiles as pets reflects changing attitudes toward animals and the natural world. What was once feared is now studied, appreciated, and cared for.

Thanks to science, captive breeding, better technology, and the spread of information, reptiles have gone from mysterious creatures hiding in the shadows to valued pets in homes across the world.

They may never fetch a ball, come when called, or pretend to be impressed by your life choices. But for millions of people, reptiles have earned a permanent place in the family.

#nationalreptilekeepersday

For some tips and tricks check out our YouTube channel we have some fun videos with our animals and herptile care!