Name: _____ Date: _____

The Hamster's Wild Design

Reading level 13 · 1366 words

My notebook for that spring has a column for time and a column for what the hamster was doing, and the second column is almost empty until dusk. Poppy, my family's Syrian hamster, slept through every afternoon I checked. Then at around nine she would emerge, stretch, and head for the wheel. My dad, who is the adult in charge of her care, told me that this is exactly what the RSPCA predicts, and I began to enjoy being proved right by a clock: wild hamsters are usually active only at dusk and at night, and can run up to five miles a day.

A nocturnal life leaves marks on the body. The RSPCA notes that hamsters have large eyes and a retina dominated by rods, the cells that still work when the light is dim. That explains why Poppy tolerates a darkened room so well. It also explains why, in the RSPCA's words, she is sensitive to bright sunlight. It also explains a household rule that I used to find fussy. The lights in her room go off at about the same time every night, and nobody wakes her in the middle of the day unless it is absolutely necessary, because the RSPCA says that handling a resting hamster can be stressful for it.

If the eyes are tuned for dim light, the other senses carry the load. Woodgreen, a British charity, says hamsters have very poor eyesight, which is why a careful grown-up lifts one with both hands and keeps it low. The RSPCA describes whiskers that vibrate backward and forward up to thirty times a second, gathering information about whatever is nearby, and a sense of smell that matters for social communication. Hearing is acute as well. Hamsters are very sensitive to high-frequency sounds that people cannot hear, which is why the RSPCA advises keeping the cage away from televisions, computer screens, vacuum cleaners, and running water.

Sound may also be a language that we are missing. The RSPCA reports that hamster pups that have fallen out of the nest may emit ultrasonic calls, and that smell is really important for social communication, so a hamster's world may be full of messages that we can neither hear nor smell. That is a humbling thought for a person who takes notes with a pencil. It does not tell me what Poppy is saying on any given night. It tells me that a quiet room, to us, may not be a quiet room to her, and that the sensible response is to keep her cage away from the noisiest appliances.

The shape of the cage follows from where hamsters come from. The RSPCA calls them terrestrial, burrow-digging rodents whose natural habitat is dry, rocky plains or lightly vegetated slopes, where they build nests inside their burrows. They dig quickly, so a poorly built cage is easy to escape. Bedding must be deep enough to tunnel in, and the floor should be solid, since wire mesh can lead to foot problems. Woodgreen puts a figure on it: at least six

inches of bedding across most of the cage. The RSPCA gives no number, only that it be deep enough for the hamster to dig. The exact depth may matter less than the principle.

Warmth belongs here too. Wild hamsters hibernate through the winter, waking now and then to feed. The RSPCA explains that a pet hamster kept outdoors might slip into a hibernation-like state called torpor, which can be dangerous because pet hamsters do not carry enough fat to go without food for long. So Poppy lives indoors, away from drafts and damp, and a grown-up checks on her every day. If a hamster ever seems unusually still and cold, the right response is not to experiment but to tell a grown-up straight away, who can keep the hamster warm and call a vet if there is any doubt.

Then there are the pouches. A Syrian hamster can carry up to half its body weight in food in its cheeks, which it empties in the nest as a survival strategy. The very word hamster comes from the German hamstern, meaning to hoard. In the wild, hamsters eat a mixture of seeds, cereals, insect larvae, and larger insects, so a pet food is only a stand-in. Scattering Poppy's meal around the cage lets her forage and carry, which the RSPCA says helps prevent boredom. The RSPCA also warns that grapes and rhubarb can be poisonous to rodents, although Woodgreen lists grapes as a treat. I trust the cautious page.

The same logic explains why Poppy lives alone. In the wild, adult Syrian hamsters generally occupy lone burrows, and the RSPCA says Syrian and Chinese hamsters are not naturally sociable and should always live on their own. Hamsters talk through smell, using pheromones. When strangers meet, they quickly sort out a hierarchy in which one animal becomes dominant. The RSPCA adds that hamsters do not play-fight, so any fight must be taken seriously. Fights tend to happen at night. For that reason it advises against even placing unfamiliar hamsters in cages side by side. The picture is less tidy for the dwarf species. The RSPCA says some can sometimes live in pairs or trios if raised together, while Woodgreen says all hamsters are safer alone, so even here the sources do not quite agree.

Teeth tell a similar story. A hamster's teeth never stop growing, and the incisors are self-sharpening, grinding against each other as the hamster gnaws. That elegant system has a weak point. If one incisor becomes damaged, the other can keep growing, and this may eventually stop the hamster from eating. So the RSPCA says to check the front teeth regularly and to take a hamster to the vet if they overgrow. All rodents take their name from the Latin words for gnaw and tooth, and Woodgreen suggests fruit-tree wood for a hamster to gnaw. It is another example of a rule that only makes sense once you know the biology underneath it.

The most useful thing I learned was how often careful sources disagree. For cage size, Woodgreen recommends at least a hundred centimeters wide, fifty deep, and fifty high for a Syrian hamster, while the RSPCA gives no figure. For wheels, the RSPCA wants a large, solid wheel, such as one made for rats, and Woodgreen specifies twelve inches for a Syrian. On cleaning, the RSPCA says a deep clean once or twice a month is enough. Woodgreen

suggests spot cleaning daily and a refresh every two to three weeks. For wood shavings, the RSPCA allows dust-free ones, but Woodgreen warns that shavings and sawdust can harm the skin and the airway, so the sources point in opposite directions.

My dad's rule for such cases is the same as the one I would give anyone: when two good sources differ, take the more cautious advice and ask a vet. Woodgreen adds a reminder that most vets rarely see hamsters, so it is worth finding one with experience. Woodgreen suggests a weekly check by the adult in charge, looking at the eyes, teeth, coat, and body for anything unusual, and I learned to describe what I saw rather than guess what it meant. The RSPCA reminds us that hamsters lose condition fast and do not show outward signs of pain, and that only medicines recommended by a vet should ever be used, because medicines made for people or for other animals can be dangerous to a hamster.

The last point is the one I did not expect. The RSPCA states that looking after a hamster is too much responsibility for a child, so the work in my notebook is work I do beside an adult and never in place of one. That sounded like a limit when I first read it. Now it reads to me like good science, because the people who know most about an animal are the ones who say plainly what they cannot promise. I wash my hands after every night log, as the NHS advises after touching pets, their food, or their cages. Ask a grown-up to look at Peabody Pets with you. You will find it at pet.peabody.kids.

Questions

1. Why can a TV or a vacuum cleaner stress a hamster?

A. They give off heat
B. They make high-pitched sounds people cannot hear
C. They change the room's smell

2. What does the word hamster come from?

A. A Latin word for cheek
B. A Greek word for night
C. A German word meaning to hoard

3. Why is it risky to keep two Syrian hamsters in one cage?

A. They are solitary, and fights can cause serious injury
B. They share food
C. They do not need exercise

4. What does torpor mean in this book?

A. A fast kind of run
B. A way to carry food
C. A deep, cold sleep that can be dangerous for a pet hamster

5. What does Nia's family do when two good sources give different advice?

A. Follow the more careful advice and ask a vet

B. Pick the larger number

C. Ignore both

Words to know

nocturnal: night active

pheromones: scent signals

torpor: deep sleep

incisor: front tooth

hoard: store up

terrestrial: living on land

Answer key: The Hamster's Wild Design

1. B. They make high-pitched sounds people cannot hear
2. C. A German word meaning to hoard
3. A. They are solitary, and fights can cause serious injury
4. C. A deep, cold sleep that can be dangerous for a pet hamster
5. A. Follow the more careful advice and ask a vet