

How wild is too wild? Pets that are prohibited in NYC - and safety tips for those that are allowed

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Roca/News

Meow! A 400-lb. Bengal-Siberian tiger named Ming was removed from a Harlem apartment in 2003.

If this week's chimp rampage hasn't

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persuaded you from keeping an exotic pet, know that having such an animal in your apartment is against the law as well. New York City residents can forget about sharing their apartment with a non-human primate – chimps, monkeys, gorillas and apes are all prohibited by the New York City Department of Health. It's also illegal to own such pets as an iguana, a ferret and a cobra snake (even if he's been de venomized).

The laws here are very specific about dogs and cats, too. Only domesticated varieties may be legally kept as pets, so unless you own a circus, forget about cheetahs, jaguars and bobcats. And, just in case you are wondering, elephants and horses are off limits, too.

No matter what kind of an animal you choose, it's important to keep in mind that he or she is a pet, not a human member of the family. The chimpanzee that attacked a woman in Connecticut earlier this week reportedly was treated more like a person than a pet by his owners. And disaster can strike when pet owners start blurring the boundaries and expecting their animals to behave like people, experts say.

"Sometimes a pet owner starts forgetting that it's a dog, or a snake, or a cat," says Dr. David Baron, professor and chair of the department of psychiatry at Temple University School of Medicine. "An animal does not have the brains or ability to always respond in the way an owner might expect, and it has certain limitations and requirements. You run into trouble when you expect too much from your pet. At the end of the day, a snake is still a snake."

A chimpanzee who surfs the Internet and drinks wine – like Connecticut chimp Travis reportedly did – may be a rare pick for a pet. But animals like parrots, macaws, iguanas and even gerbils can be risky, too, especially in homes with children under the age of 10, says veterinarian Dr. Michael Farber, founder of West Chelsea Veterinary. Kids handle animals differently than adults do and when they see a cuddly, furry creature, they want to pick it up and squeeze it, he says.

"This makes kids a lot more susceptible to getting bitten," Farber says. "A child doesn't understand that he can't just grab it, and the animal's natural instinct is to protect itself."

Rabbits and guinea pigs tend to make safer pets for kids, while gerbils, hamsters and mice are biters best not given to young children. Both macaws and parrots have beaks that pose danger to a small child, Farber explains. "Either could easily bite off a child's finger."



Travis the chimp reportedly was well-behaved for many years before he turned on a friend of his Connecticut owner.

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Though cats and dogs are among the safest pets, Farber does not recommend bringing an adult dog from a rescue operation into a home with children under age six. "There's a lot you don't know about the animal," he says. "There could have been other issues with an animal."

As for pet reptiles like lizards and turtles, these, too, should be reserved for kids over age 10 to 12, he says. These animals can harbor salmonella, and it's important for anyone who handles them to wash their hands. Younger children aren't as vigilant about handwashing, Farber explains.

If a pet owner starts treating his animal like a human, it may be a sign of problems with his own interpersonal relationships, explains Baron.

"Pets are very important and therapeutic," he says. "But when a person has an overriding need to treat a pet like a human companion, he might want to take a look at his relationships with friends and family to see if there are problems."

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