

Chapter 1

Hankering for a Hamster

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In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting acquainted
 - ▶ Tracing the hamster's path to domesticity
 - ▶ Meeting the species of pet hamsters
 - ▶ Examining hamster anatomy
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The old comic line “What’s not to like?” fits hamsters perfectly. With their bright, inquisitive faces, agile bodies, and deft little paws, they’ve been engaging and entertaining families for generations.

Your decision to purchase a hamster may have been prompted by memories of a childhood friend. But whether this is your first hamster or just the first one you’ve had since you earned your allowance by cleaning the cage, you’ll want to know how to make life safe and fun for your new companion, for yourself, and for your family.

How to Use This Book

Hamsters are hoarders, who stuff their cheek pouches full of goodies they may want to eat later. Think of this book the same way: as your secret cache of knowledge that you can use a little at a time, or all at once. You may have picked up this book along with your new hamster at the pet shop, or maybe you decided to read up on these animals before making a purchase. No matter where you started, this book tells you where to go next.

If you’re interested in the history of the breed, I’ve included some tidbits of *olde* hamster for you to enjoy, but if you want to cut to the chase, I’ve made that easy too. The book is clearly organized in chapters you can read consecutively, or from which you can pick and choose to find out just what you need to know, just when you need to know it. Text in sidebars (the occasional gray box) is interesting but not essential, so you can skip them if you’re in a hurry.

While reading *Hamsters For Dummies*, be on the lookout for these icons:



Paragraphs with this icon attached offer some juicy advice for making the most of your hamster experience.



When you see this icon, pay attention: The info in these paragraphs is worth storing in your mental filing cabinet.



This icon alerts you to information that helps you be the best pet owner possible by recognizing and avoiding potential dangers.



Paragraphs accompanied by this icon often contain medical or historical information and are not absolutely essential (unless you're earning a PhD in hamster).

While one breed of hamster, the Syrian Gold, is probably the most popular, in this book I also tell you about four other breeds that are common household pets, and what's fun and interesting about each.

Unfortunately, not all pet shops have knowledgeable staff, so use the pictures and descriptions in this book to help you determine what you've bought or are buying. Each breed of hamster differs, not only in size but also in temperament and some habits. The more you know, the more successful your hamster experience will be.

I explain what hamsters like to eat, how they socialize, what to look for in a healthy hamster, and how to spot the signs that yours may not be feeling too well. And because hamsters are very often pets in a family, I also talk about how to help your children love and care for their new friend, too.

Hate textbooks? Don't worry, this isn't one. Think of it as a picnic. Eat/read what you like, and put the rest back in the basket.

What Is a Hamster?

Hamsters, along with their kissing cousins the guinea pig, the vole, mice, and rats, are rodents. They have lots of company: About 40 percent of the world's mammal population is rodents — about 1,500 species out of some 4,000. (No wonder it's crowded out there!) House mice and lab rats may come to mind first, but rodents include chipmunks, woodchucks, and beavers.

Although as different as porcupines (yes, they're rodents, too!) are from squirrels, rodents all have some characteristics in common — much the way everyone on your father's side of the family has those jagged eyebrows, and all your first cousins can carry a tune.

“What big teeth you have, grandma . . .”

A rodent's teeth are one of its most distinctive features. Rodents have a single pair of incisors in each jaw. These long, sharp teeth (which look a little like the claws of a hammer) continue to grow throughout the animal's life and are worn down by chewing.



Between a rodent's incisors and molars is a handy gap called a *diastema*, which allows him to store food or housing materials (like dirt or wood) before his powerful jaws push those materials back to be ground down by the molars.

Family values

It's a tough life being a small, furry object out in the wild, waiting to be some predator's lunch. (Birds of prey dine regularly on rodents.) For this reason, many rodent species become sexually mature very early (in some cases in as little as a few weeks). They also have large litters to ensure the survival of, if not the fittest, at least the mostest! (I talk about how to control your family of hamsters in Chapter 7.)

Rodents also nurse their young, another distinctively mammalian characteristic. This behavior helps make them seem affectionately familiar to us, even as we marvel at what is so different about them.

Not just a rodent

Let's face it: The word *rodent* doesn't exactly inspire warmth and affection. Instead, it makes homeowners think of hidden messes and ruined wiring, and it gives farmers visions of ruined crops. But domestic hamsters have lots of endearing attributes. For example, they're hard workers and good housekeepers — habits that they picked up in the wild.

Many species of hamsters exist, but they generally share small, stout bodies; short tails; cheek pouches (they really have that “made-for-Disney” look); and terrific burrowing abilities. Hamsters are shyer and less clever than rats or mice, but they take top honors in cuteness.



What's in a name?

As with many word origins, the ultimate source of *hamster* is disputed. However, the word may come from the Middle High German word *hamastra*, which means “to store.” (This would make sense because hamsters are prodigious hoarders.) Hamsters were once known, not very accurately or politely, as *German rats*.

Although they vary somewhat according to type (especially now that they have been “customized” by breeders), hamsters share some essential traits — things that make hamsters, well, hamsters. I discuss these traits later in the chapter, in the sections “The Hamster Five: Meet the Species” and “Sizing Them Up: The Anatomy of a Hamster.”

Where Hamsters Come From: A Brief History

Chances are your hamster will be called Nathan, or Doris, or Winky, or Puff Daddy, or Brittany. But he or she (I tell you how to figure out which is which in Chapter 6) is probably descended from hamsters who came from Syria, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, or Bulgaria.

Hamsters have secretive habits: In the wild, they live in burrows anywhere from 2- to 10-feet deep. For this reason, scientists aren't quite sure when the hamster first distinguished itself as a species. However, the earliest written reference to a hamster — a Syrian Gold hamster, to be exact — appeared in 1797 (see the “World premiere: 1797” sidebar).

The Syrian Gold hamster made her next appearance in 19th-century England. This was the England of Charles Darwin, when lots of scientists and travelers were becoming interested in the natural world and anything that could be drawn, described, and dissected. One enthusiast was George Waterhouse, the curator (in 1839) of the London Zoological Society, who presented this “new” species of hamster from Aleppo (which had been written about by a fellow Englishman almost 100 years earlier). He called it *cricetus auretus*.

Traveling the road toward pethood

By the mid-19th century, hamsters had made their mark zoologically, but the next leg of their journey into our homes came quite a bit later, in the 1930s. A parasitologist working at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Saul Adler, was having trouble obtaining hamsters from China for his study of a fly-borne disease. He asked a colleague, Israel Aharoni, to try to capture some hamsters that were native to the region and could be bred in captivity.

Aharoni's task wasn't easy, because anxious hamsters can kill their young, and all are great escape artists. But with some difficulty he became, literally, the father of the domestic Syrian hamster. From the single litter of 11 that he found in the wild (whose offspring were delivered to Adler) descended generations of lab animals that were sent to research facilities in England, India, and eventually, the United States.

Hamsters are so prolific that, amazingly, after the 1930s no new strains of Syrian hamster were introduced into this country until an MIT graduate student, Michael Murphy, captured a dozen (eight females, four males) that started the next hamster "wave" — in 1971!

Moving from lab to lap

Hamsters may have arrived in the United States as lab animals, but these exotic charmers soon enchanted their handlers with their docility, playfulness, and beauty.

World premiere: 1797

The first written reference to a hamster appeared in the second edition of a book called *The Natural History of Aleppo* (referring to an ancient Syrian city), revised by naturalist Patrick Russell after the death of the original author, his brother Alexander.

Like many scientists of the period, Patrick evidently sought out examples of the local flora and fauna, and after excavating the stuffed pouch of what became know as the *Syrian Gold hamster*, he was astonished to discover a mass of green beans that, "when they were laid loosely on the table . . . formed a heap three times the bulk of the animal's body."

For my next trick . . .

Here's a bit of fun trivia: Parasitologist Saul Adler, responsible for the widespread dissemination of the Syrian Gold hamster, also translated Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* into Hebrew.

In 1948, an opportunistic Alabamian named Albert Marsh, who had won a Syrian hamster in a bet, saw the possibilities in marketing these lab animals as pets. He acted as a middleman between other small breeders and pet shop clients, and he also wrote his own hamster manual. He established the hamster as a profitable niche market in the pet industry.

The Hamster Five: Meet the Species

I mention the Syrian hamster in the previous section, but four other species of hamster are also part of the pet population: the Campbell's hamster, the Winter White or Dwarf Russian hamster, the Roborovski hamster, and the Chinese or Gray hamster. To be clear, many other species of hamsters exist in the wild, but these five are the ones you're most likely to encounter in a pet store. Not every store has a full selection, of course. Syrians still predominate, but the dwarf types are becoming quite popular, and breeders specialize in particular strains (see Chapter 3).

Just to confuse matters, some of these five species are known by common names, because the species weren't clearly distinguished when they were first identified. For example, some Syrian hamsters — those with fuzzy coats — are called *Teddy Bear hamsters*, and Winter White and Campbell's hamsters are sometimes called *Djungarian hamsters* (which does not refer to a school of psychoanalysis, by the way, but the region in Siberia where they originated).

In the following sections, I briefly describe each species. Table 1-1 offers basic information about each of the five so you can get an overview at a glance. Note that while White Whites are often formally designated as "Dwarf" hamsters, Chinese and Roborovski hamsters are also considered dwarf in some classifications.

<i>Genus</i>	<i>Size</i>	<i>Weight</i>	<i>Color</i>
Campbell's	2–4 inches	1–2 ounces	Gray or variety
Chinese (also called <i>Gray</i>)	4–5 inches	1½–1¾ ounces	Brown with white stripe, white with brown patches, or gray with dorsal stripe
Roborovski	2–4 inches	1–1½ ounces	Gray
Syrian	4–7 inches	5–7 ounces	Golden and varieties
Winter White (also called <i>Dwarf Russian</i>)	2–4 inches	1–2 ounces	White/gray (seasonal)

Syrian Gold hamster

The hamster that started it all is the largest of the pet species, often measuring 6 to 7 inches and weighing between 5 and 7 ounces.

While this hamster's color in the wild is usually golden brown with a white belly and chest (hence its official name; see Figure 1-1), the domestic Syrian now comes in as many as 20 color *morphs* (as they are known in hamster breeding circles), including black, cinnamon, and yellow, and a variety of coats, including a longhaired version that looks like an agitated starlet on her way to a movie premiere!



Figure 1-1: A Syrian Gold hamster.

Color morphs

While hamsters in the wild come in shades such as gold, gray, and brown, often with a *dorsal* (down the back) stripe, humans can never resist making a good thing better. So in captivity, hamsters have been bred to come in as many shades as fashionable fabrics, from pure white to deep sable. These variations on a theme are known as *color morphs*. I discuss color options in more detail in Chapter 3.



Syrians have longer life spans than other hamsters (see Chapter 2) and are the most easily socialized breed. Syrians are the hamsters you generally find in pet shops. They are terrific fighters among themselves, and Syrians definitely shouldn't be kept together past the age of 5 weeks.

Campbell's hamster

Despite its Scottish name, this hamster sports no tartan. Instead, it is a Mongolian native named for naturalist W.C. Campbell, who discovered it in 1902. Generally measuring 3 to 4 inches, these daintier hamsters are usually grayish (see Figure 1-2).



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Figure 1-2: A Campbell's hamster.

Plump and elegant, these hamsters are more communal than Syrians by nature and can live together if they've been brought up together (the reverse of some human families).

This species might also be dubbed the “sensitive New Age hamster,” because males participate in birthing and help to raise the young.

Winter White hamster

Members of this species sound like characters from an old fairy tale: They are commonly known as *Dwarf Winter White Russian hamsters*. But they are also sometimes referred to as *Siberian* or *Djungarian* hamsters.

These hamsters' coats change color with the season. In summer, they look like well-dressed businessmen, in gray suits with a dark stripe down the side (see Figure 1-3). In winter, they look more like fairy tale characters, with white or nearly white fur (see Figure 1-4). Captive Winter Whites don't always lose all their coloration, as this requires more natural light than is common to many houses or apartments. Scientists use this species for studies on how seasonality affects the brain.



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Figure 1-3: A Winter White hamster with its summer coat.



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Figure 1-4: A Winter White hamster with its winter coat.



The *dwarf* appellation comes from the fact that these hamsters can be as small as 2 to 4 inches. Despite their size, they cause more allergic reactions in humans than other pet hamster species. If you're sensitive to dander, dust, or pet hair, this may not be the breed for you.

These charmers are increasingly popular and another common sight at pet stores. Their rabbit-like ears and pert expressions put them out front in the cuteness stakes, but they don't exactly have a temperament to match; they can be nippy until they get to know you. Then there's the agility factor — one pet store owner describes them as “popcorn” because they're ready to bounce right out of your hand. This makes them a hoot to watch as they manipulate their exercise toys, of course.



Latin rhythms

I promise I won't quiz you, but just in case you want to know, the Latin names for the five most common pet hamsters are as follows:

- ✓ Syrian Gold hamster: *Mesocricetus auratus*
- ✓ Campbell's hamster: *Phodopus campbelli*
- ✓ Winter White hamster: *Phodopus sungorus*
- ✓ Roborovski hamster: *Phodopus roborovski*
- ✓ Chinese hamster: *Cricetulus griseus*

And if the Campbell's hamster can boast sensitive New Age males, the Winter Whites might be thought of as old hippies: Males and females share burrows with at least two members of the opposite sex!

Roborovski hamster

A latecomer to the pet market, the Roborovski hamster was discovered in 1894 by — you guessed it — a Lieutenant Roborovski. But they weren't really domesticated until the 1970s. They hail from Mongolia, China, and Russia and are native to flat, sandy areas.

These hamsters are definitely night creatures, at their liveliest from 9 to 10 p.m. They're also a little shyer than other hamsters. Their brownish-gray fur is almost electric in color and a little tousled (see Figure 1-5).



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Figure 1-5: A Roborovski hamster.

Chinese hamster

This elegant breed, also referred to as the *Gray hamster*, is notable for the sleek dark stripe down its back, which stands out from its sable-colored fur (see Figure 1-6). Slenderer than some of their pudgier cousins, Chinese hamsters measure about 4 to 5 inches. (There is also a mouse-like Dwarf Chinese hamster that measures only 1 to 2 inches.) They have longer tails than other hamsters, which some scientists believe are helpful for balance in the rocky regions of their native China and Mongolia.



Figure 1-6: Chinese hamsters.

In captivity, these hamsters are exercise fiends. They probably helped to create the popular image of the hamster running constantly on a wheel. Although often sold in same-sex pairs, experts say they can actually become quite aggressive towards each other, although they are usually extremely docile with people.

What's in a name?

Some pet shops now feature the *European hamster*. This is just casual labeling and usually refers to one of the Syrian types.

Sizing Them Up: The Anatomy of a Hamster

While the preceding section demonstrates the astonishing variety that exists among the hamster species, the basic hamster chassis (see Figure 1-7) is fundamentally the same.

Body by Fisher — not

This old auto slogan, referring to sleek efficiency, doesn't quite fit our hamster friends. *Barrel-shaped* is the common adjective applied to hamsters, although the tousled coats of Teddy Bear hamsters

conceal its contours and Chinese hamsters are more mouse-like. Basically, you're looking at a sleek little keg of an animal, usually ranging from 4 to 7 inches long.



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Figure 1-7: All hamsters share the same basic anatomy.

Bright eyes

While we're using old-fashioned expressions, "bright as a button" is another one that fits the hamster perfectly. Indeed, their shiny eyes look almost as if they're buttons sewn onto a child's stuffed animal.

Hamsters are prey animals rather than predators, so (like horses) their eyes are set a little to the sides of their heads, and they are farsighted — the better to see you with before you can eat them. Close up, hamsters rely more on their senses of smell and hearing.

Oh my nose and whiskers!

The hamster's soft pointed nose helps her navigate the world. This triangular feature ends in a soft (usually pink) snout that the hamster uses to recognize food, friends, family (including potential mates), and danger.

In addition to relying on a keen sense of smell, hamsters also use their long whiskers almost like antennae to sense the world around them.

All ears

Hamsters' small leaf-like ears are among their most charming features, but they're not all for show. Constantly twitching, they tell the hamster about the world around him and can sense vibrations on the ground and in the air (so the hamster can identify sources of potential danger). Like dogs, hamsters can discern higher frequencies than we can.

Cheeky

One of the hamster's most distinctive features is her cheek pouches, into which an amazing amount of food can be stuffed for a rainy day. The soft elastic skin distends and enables the hamster to transfer food and bedding, as well as to show that she's fighting mad!

Teeth

The hamster's incisors are useful tools for shredding food of all sorts, fluffing up bedding and nesting material, and capturing wandering babies. They're also handy for fighting. The top pair of incisors has a little gap into which the bottom pair fits neatly.

Hipsters

One reason for hamsters' reliance on smell is that they are equipped with glands behind their ears and, on Syrian hamsters, just at the point of their hips. These glands exude distinct odors — nature's own cologne or aftershave — that help hamsters distinguish one another and know when to mark territory.

The duplex

Despite their diminutive size, hamsters, like cows, have two stomachs. The first stomach partially digests their food, which then passes to the second stomach for absorption. This handy feature allows them to process a wide range of foodstuffs, which has enabled their continued survival in an ever-changing environment and makes them easy keepers at home. (Your child doesn't like vegetables? Never fear, your hamster's here!)

Scruffy

The fleshy area behind a hamster's ears, known as the *scruff* or *nape*, doesn't have any particular function for them. However, it's tremendously useful to us (and veterinarians) because it provides a safe, efficient way to grasp a hamster without her being able to move too much. (Hamster opponents and mates take the same advantage.)

Pianissimo

If they made instruments small enough, hamsters would be great pianists. Their small, five-toed front paws are dexterous and mobile, allowing them to easily grasp and manipulate food and to climb. Their longer, kangaroo-like hind paws are flattish so that they can push off vigorously (on that exercise wheel you're going to buy, for example) and stand up in a characteristic inquisitive stance. Some breeds, like the Winter White, have paws that are more furred.

Tail (less)

The Chinese hamster has a tail about one-third the size of its body, giving it a somewhat mouse-like appearance. But that species is the exception; most hamsters' tails taper off into a small, triangular stub.

