

Pets and the Pandemic

Hannah Barton-Cooke

3rd year Veterinary Science

On the odd occasion when I've been called 'Crazy Cat Lady' in the past, I've not taken offence; I unashamedly adore my feline babies. In 2020, my two indoor cats - Isla and Lola - remained faithfully by my side, with not a care in the world, as I desperately tried to adjust to COVID life and university being online. Seemingly overnight, our whole understanding of concepts like 'practicals', 'dissections' and 'clinical skills' changed beyond recognition, as we had to adapt to watching, instead of doing these sessions. Then, as zoom calls and team meetings established themselves as the 'new norm' in our lives, it appears my cats have viewed this as a perfect opportunity to get their big break into the media industry. Isla, in particular, seems to have made it her life's mission to make a cameo appearance on tutorials, whenever my camera is turned on. Her typical performance comprises of giving everyone a little 360° spin, offering a quick flash of her back-end to the screen, before trying to find the best place to nestle down on my laptop. At the same time, there's Lola mistaking my slipper socks for a small furry mammal and going all predatory on me, or playing with boomerang-like toys that clatter and smash around my little island of Uni work. Whilst such commotion is arguably not fully conducive to academic success, in all honesty, I quite like the little pockets of entertainment my cats give me during the day.



As I am studying Veterinary Medicine, Isla and Lola have also become useful 'living models', to apply what I learn in lectures to my own cats (please note: this is for diagnostic purposes only; no surgery has taken place in my home). For example, during behaviour lectures, we were taught how cats can display negative social behaviour, such as engaging in quiet stand offs, showing particular body posture, and so on. The lecturer suggested that sometimes the negative behaviour between cats can be so subtle, owners may even struggle to notice it. It was at that precise moment I heard a massive thud, followed by frantic footsteps running down the stairs, before my two cats burst into the room in the midst of a (thankfully, rare) brawl. Clearly, Isla and Lola wanted to make their negative feelings nice and easy for me to interpret.

“Admittedly, lockdown gerbils may not have the same immediate appeal as the new pet dog (...)”

Having previously only ever had cats, I ventured outside my metaphorical pet box in October 2020 by getting two adorable little gerbils, and am now well on the way to becoming a self-proclaimed 'Raving Rodent Woman'. You may well be thinking, cats and gerbils don't sound like such a sensible mix (cue Tom and sort-of-Jerry jokes), but rest assured Isla and Lola are kept away from them at all times, so the gerbils are perfectly safe! My first challenge was to think of the best names for them. As there are two males (gerbils are social species so you must get at least a pair) I was quite spoilt for choice by the list of famous/infamous dynamic duos to choose from: Caesar and Mark Antony; George and Lennie; Morecambe and Wise; Freddie and Jason; Macbeth and Banquo, to list but a few... (side note: it was disconcerting to compare the abundance of well-known male dynamic duos with renowned female couples, but that's a reflection for another time...). In the end, I thought 'Scrooge and Marley' was perfect, as Scrooge has a nice, 'old man' shade of grey fur and Marley is a beautiful, ghostly white.

Admittedly, lockdown gerbils may not have the same immediate appeal as the new pet dog that gave so many people an excuse to leave the house last year, but I can safely say they come with their own benefits - they're low maintenance, are happy to keep themselves occupied and provide endless free entertainment. When figuring out which cage would be best, I read that gerbils require lots and lots of bedding to allow them to replicate their natural burrowing behaviour in the desert. Having bought what I naively thought was a really decent sized one to prepare



for their arrival, I went off it by the end of the first month and decided 'my boys' deserved nothing less than a palace for a cage. Overnight, I became an architect/ interior designer, and got to work on my creation... The final result (for now!) is their original cage placed on top of a whopper of a fish tank, filled with masses of bedding. As for making the tunnels, Scrooge seems to have mastered the art and can create a system of intricate and complex thoroughfares; whereas Marley resembles a bulldozer, spending most of his time and energy figuring how to kick out the bedding!

To non-animal lovers (or possibly, to everyone!) I may be sounding absolutely barmy for writing a whole reflection on how much I love my pets. What I haven't mentioned - until now - is that 2020 also made me proud owner and

'mum' of a packet full of Aqua Dragons (aka sea monkeys, or more scientifically, *Artemia salinas*) which, miraculously, actually hatched! Nor have I admitted - until now - that I have become mildly possessive of the various species of birds that frequent our garden and have, perchance, begun to consider the couple of pigeons that come to visit daily, as 'part of the family'...

The truth is, throughout lockdown, our pets have provided us with much-needed serotonin to help us through this bizarre time. They are funny, they are cute and, whilst 2020 may have been the 'Year of Government U-Turns', our furry friends remain as dependable and constant as ever.

