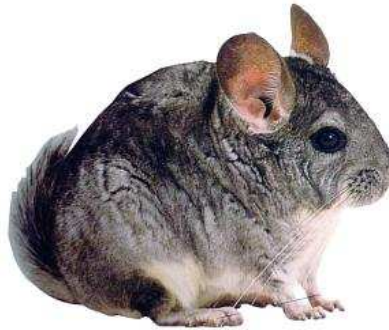


The Chinchilla



History and Biology

The chinchilla is a medium size rodent that originates from the Andes. They were kept and used by the Incas for food and clothing. Chinchillas were later brought to Europe where their pelts became fashionable and widely used for clothing. This demand for their luxurious pelts almost made them extinct and by the early 1900s the wild population was sparse. With governmental assistance, an American man trapped eleven wild chinchillas in 1923 (*C lanigera*) and bred them in captivity, servicing the demand for the fur trade, but also securing survival of the species.

There are two species, *Chinchilla lanigera* and *Chinchilla brevicaudata*. The latter is much larger with a shorter tail, thicker neck and smaller ears, but is now considered rare, possibly extinct.

Chinchillas are non-burrowing animals that live in groups in rock crevices or burrows at elevations above 4000 metres (15,000 feet). They are adapted to a barren mountainous terrain; thick fur protects them from the cold temperatures and foot pads allow agility on rocky surfaces.

Chinchillas have soft and dense fur. The tail is long and covered with short coarse hairs. Through selective breeding, there is a wide range of coat colours. These include silver, white, platinum, black velvet, sapphire, rose/apricot, chocolate brown and albino.

Chinchillas are social animals that rarely fight. They are generally nocturnal and prefer a quiet environment during the day, although some individuals can be active in the daytime. Chinchillas do not hibernate. They are clean and inquisitive, but can be shy, jumpy and reluctant to sit still for long, making them more appropriate as pets for older children and adults.

Their average life expectancy is eight to ten years, and their average bodyweight is 400-600grams, with the females being slightly larger

Diet

Free ranging chinchillas survive on a diet of grasses, cactus fruit, leaves and the bark of small scrubs and bushes. The chinchilla originates from an area of the Andes where vegetation is tough and fibrous and low in energy content. This requires a high food intake, with lots of chewing to obtain the nutrients. Chinchillas need this high fibre diet to maintain their teeth. Therefore, the recommended chinchilla diet consists of a good quality grass hay (timothy) and a small amount of chinchilla pellets. Because the diet must be high in fibre, pellets should NEVER be fed on their own and hay should be available at all times, which is essential to keep the digestive system healthy and also to help wear down their continually growing teeth. Pellets should be limited to 1-2 tablespoons per day. The chinchilla diet must be very low in fat and they should never have sunflower seeds or peanuts in their diet, as they can easily become overweight if they have too much fat and, over the long term, this can be fatal. Fruit and small amounts of greens can be offered as treats.

Any change in the diet should be made gradually, over several days, as chinchillas have very sensitive stomachs that are easily upset by sudden changes in the diet.

It is preferable to feed your chinchilla at the same time every day, in the late afternoon or early evening. Always make sure that your chinchilla has access to fresh, clean drinking water, which should be changed daily.