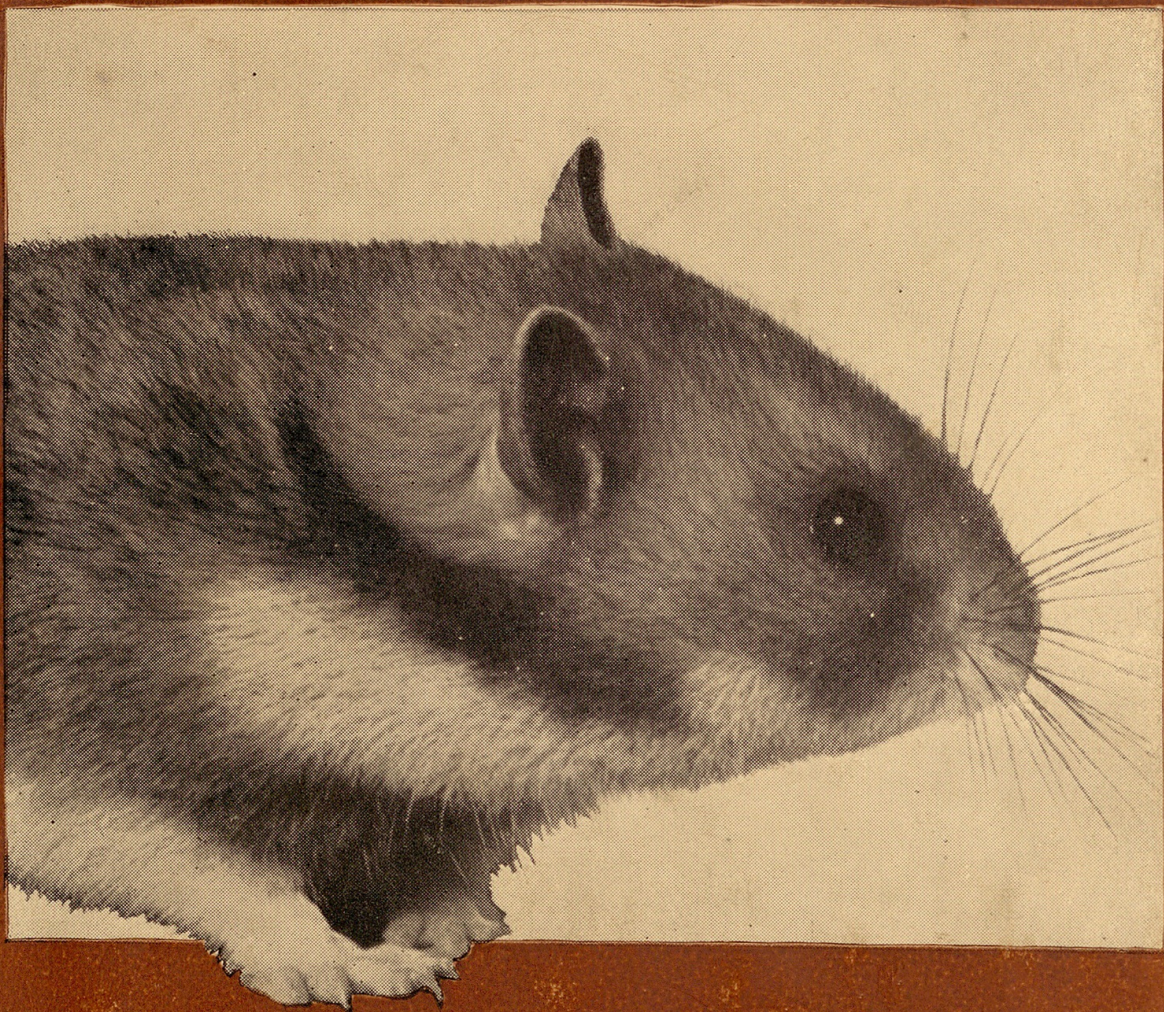


THE  
*Hamster*  
HANDBOOK

BY H. DEATON & T. W. POND



A PRACTICAL ILLUSTRATED GUIDE TO THE BUYING,  
HOUSING, FEEDING AND BREEDING OF HAMSTERS



## CHAPTER I

### FROM A DEEP BURROW

IT all began on an April day in the year 1930. Israel Aharoni, in a scientific expedition in Syria, was digging in a field near Aleppo when a burrow was unearthed eight feet below the surface of the ground. Although it was not realised at the time, that burrow contained the "Adams and Eves" of a pet that was to become established in homes and schools all over the world, for in it was found an anxious female Golden Hamster with her litter of twelve young.

They were captured alive, and taken to the Jerusalem Hebrew University, where they were found to breed freely in captivity. From this original female and litter of twelve have descended all the thousands of hamsters now kept in all parts of the world, for a Dr. S. Adler saw in them a useful laboratory animal, and arranged for pairs to be sent to England, America, France, and many other interested countries.

Two pairs were sent to Dr. Edward Hindle in 1931, who bred them at Hampstead and at the University of Glasgow, and published an account of their breeding and growth in 1934 in which he described them as follows :

*" The Golden Hamster is smaller than the common European Hamster, a full-grown female rarely exceeding a length of seven inches, and has a deep golden-brown colour, but towards the roots the hairs are dark grey. The fur is short, soft, and smooth. The ventral surface is a very light grey, with white patches. The ears are large, grey, and almost naked, with a few golden-brown hairs on the outer surface. The eyes are large and black.*

*The skin is extremely loose, to such an extent that folds at least two inches deep can be pulled out from any part of the trunk. The short, stumpy tail, and especially the feet, are lighter in colour than the rest of the body. The cheek-pouches are well developed and can hold a surprisingly large amount of food. According to I. Aharoni (1932) these hamsters live in deep burrows which they make in grain-fields. Although in nature they are presumably herbivorous, in captivity they are omnivorous, and, in addition to grain, will feed on roots, nuts, bread, meat, etc., and will carry off and store almost any portable object."*

Dr. Hindle distributed pairs to a number of interested people, and just before the 1939 war he sent a few pairs to the London Zoo, where they were bred and surplus stock sold to the public. By the end of the war hamsters were already popular as pets.

Golden Hamsters had been named and described by G. R. Waterhouse at a meeting of the Zoological Society of London in 1839, from a skin and skull found earlier. There are several species of hamsters, and it has been suggested that the Golden Hamster is a cross between two other species, the large black-bellied European Hamster and the very small grey Chinese Hamster. The Golden Hamster's correct scientific name is *Mesocricetus auratus* (*Meso* = middle or intermediate, *cricetus* = hamster, *auratus* = golden). The name "HAMSTER" itself is from an old German word meaning "home-storer," from the hamster's habit of storing food near its nest.

There are a number of reasons why Golden Hamsters are becoming so increasingly popular as pets. Unlike the other species of hamsters, which are mostly vicious and untameable, the Golden Hamster can be made extremely tame and friendly. There is no danger of

escaped Golden Hamsters becoming a pest like their notorious European cousins, for they could not survive the outdoor English climate and their inquisitive trusting nature makes them an easy prey to other animals. Unlike some other small rodents, Golden Hamsters are scrupulously clean in person and in habit, and are odourless. This, together with their convenient size and ease of feeding, makes them ideal *indoor* pets. They are probably even more popular in towns and cities than in the country.

Their extremely short gestation period of only sixteen days is a record for mammals, and they are, therefore, an excellent subject for study in schools and colleges, and as a research animal.

But perhaps the hamster's most endearing quality as a pet is its CHARACTER. In this respect the hamster leaves rabbits, guinea pigs, tame mice and rats, and many other cage pets a long way behind. Its behaviour is almost human. It stands up, uses its tiny pink fore-paws like hands to wash itself and accept food from its owner, and its furry, bright-eyed, "teddy bear" appearance is beloved by children. Even ladies who scream at the sight of a mouse are won over by a Golden Hamster's droll behaviour and pert appearance.

Hamsters have received a good deal of publicity, having appeared on the pages of many magazines and newspapers, and in television shows. Most pet shops now stock them, and they are a favourite exhibit in the Children's Zoo at Regents Park.

Although hamsters have not been bred in captivity as long as other established forms of livestock, a number of mutations have already occurred, so that coloured varieties are available.

The first colour mutation occurred in Southsea, Hampshire, in 1948, when a breeder reported a litter

containing young hamsters whose eyes were a dark red or ruby colour instead of the normal black. When these ruby-eyed hamsters grew older it was found that the change in eye colour was accompanied by a change in the mature fur colour also, from golden-brown to fawn. These hamsters were called Ruby-Eyed Fawns.

Then from America came news of another colour mutation. In 1945 some Golden Hamsters had been born with patches of white in their fur. These had been developed into a brown-and-white hamster which American breeders called "Pandas." In 1950 some of these "Pandas" were brought to England, where they were re-named "Piebalds."

The next mutation occurred in England in 1951. A breeder in Otley, Yorkshire, sold some hamsters to another breeder in Menston, Leeds, who obtained from one mating a litter of two *cream-coloured* hamsters. Three weeks later a young breeder in Leeds who had purchased stock from the same source reported a litter containing yet another cream hamster. These hamsters retain the jet black eye and grey ears of the Golden, and are known as Black-Eyed Creams.

The most recent colour variety is again American in origin. This is a pure white albino hamster, and was first imported to England in 1954. Its dark grey ears are rather unusual on a pink-eyed albino animal, and it is known as the Dark-Eared Albino.

Various combinations of these colours have been bred, producing the Ruby-Eyed Cream (paler than the Black-Eyed Cream), the Black-Eyed Cream Piebald (cream with white patches), the Ruby-Eyed Cream Piebald (*pale* cream and white), and the Ruby-Eyed Fawn Piebald (fawn and white).

Hamsters are likely to produce colour varieties very similar to those found in rabbits and tame mice, so that

several more new colour mutations are expected to occur in the future. These mutations can happen in any litter of hamsters, anywhere, and at any time. Anyone finding a "peculiar" hamster in a litter should not destroy it, but should report it immediately.