



Cute and Cuddly? My Experience Owning a Fennec Fox

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I have been fascinated by the species since my university years when I came across some online photographs of this creature. I am very interested in animals and regularly search for more information about animals that I have had my eyes upon on the Internet. So, the fennec fox with its visually large ears and round black eyes strikes me as a unique desert dwelling animal and I found out that it is one of the only two foxes in the world which has been gradually domesticated. It is also extremely rare to find one in Malaysia as a pet (as well as being pricey if you ever find one for sale). To have one extremely unique and cute-looking animal as a pet is like a dream come true for me even though I constantly weighed the pros and cons of having a fennec fox as a pet, based on my research on its specific care.

Here are some unique facts based on my own experience of owning a fennec fox. As the smallest fox in the world, its size has remained the same from the moment I owned one until now (which has been 2 years), and I was told the dog (male fox) which I purchased from a pet shop in Ipoh, Perak, at that time, was less than 1 year old. His size is unchanged but sometimes he gets a bit fatter due to overeating. Many people might think that foxes can grow quite large, and this might be a little scary, but adult fennec foxes are actually only slightly bigger than a 2-month-old kitten and that same kitten will outgrow the fox after just a few weeks. This comparison is based on my own experiences as I also own cats purchased from breeders when they were kittens.

Interestingly, having a fennec fox is like having a cat and a dog at the same time. They are similar to dogs because they can be easily trained to do tricks, love to wag their tail when excited and their barks sound like a chihuahua. It is a bit difficult to have them litter trained, so mine, unfortunately, poos and pees all over the place. The good news is most of the time their poos are hard solid (based on their food consumption, similar to other animals) so it is easily cleaned. They have cat-like instincts to bury their poop and based on their original desert habitat, they like to dig. Their recommended diet is much more similar to a cat rather than a dog.

My male fennec fox is named Kyuu, short for Kyuubi which is the name of a demon fox that has nine (kyuu) tails (bi) in Japanese folklore. Kyuu is extremely friendly and likes to play with my other cats. As fennec foxes are nocturnal animals, Kyuu is extremely hyperactive during the early morning and at night and gets extremely grumpy when his sleep is disturbed during the day, to the point that he will try to bite when I am near. The bite of a fennec fox is rather painful and as they are classified under the big family of canids, it is advised to treat them as dogs when they go for their vet check-ups. As such, they can be infected by diseases that infect other canines such as rabies and canine distemper.



There is no easy aspect when you have a pet which is not fully domesticated and is still considered a wild animal. This is true for Kyuu as according to his documents I received from the seller; he was imported from Egypt into Malaysia. So, I had a hunch that he was captured from the wild by traders. From my readings, fennec foxes are difficult to breed in captivity. Hence, we can normally find fennec fox breeders in the U.S. online. However, closer to home, there are also breeders in Thailand because many exotic animal trades are widely available there (illegally most of the time from what I have heard). The good thing about Kyuu

is he is easily accustomed to new animals because of his friendliness and playfulness. He plays like a dog along with my cats at home, which I find extremely engaging and fascinating. Due to his close bond with me, he is very pampered and will run towards me during his active time to be petted while making cute whimper sounds.

Another good thing is, due to me owning cats, the food aspects are easier due to the similarity in their diets. He occasionally eats the cat kibbles which are readily available but due to his digging habits, those kibbles normally end up all over the place. I feed him with cooked (boiled) chicken and beef too. Fennec foxes are almost entirely carnivorous but they do eat berries and vegetables. His favourite fruit is blueberries and there are times I offer mixed berries yogurt as a treat. In the wild, the diet of a fennec fox mainly consists of insects. I have watched

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YouTube videos where fennec foxes have desert scorpions as their meal. The way they throw the scorpion up in the air is similar to how Kyuu plays with his pet toy. Of course, I am not going to purchase scorpions as a meal for him as they are expensive for a one-time meal! Fennec foxes like Kyuu can also eat mealworms, superworms, crickets and feeder roaches which are easily available in pet shops.

One of the most tedious things when you want to buy and have a rare, exotic, non-local animal as a pet in Malaysia is the local government bureaucracy that deals with the wild animal trade – The Department of Wildlife and National Parks of Peninsular Malaysia (PERHILITAN). To be able to own this kind of animal legally, the correct documents and microchip identification details are required from the seller in order to fill in the legal documents to be submitted to the officer at the PERHILITAN within 2 weeks of my purchase. Using the same microchip, I had to get a vet recognized by the PERHILITAN to insert it into the back of Kyuu's neck. Fennec foxes are nocturnal but vet and PERHILITAN offices are not, so I faced extreme difficulties to take him to a vet. Additionally, it took an assistant to take him out of the carrier and hold him down while the vet inserted the microchip, and that person came out with a bloody arm due to being bitten by Kyuu during the procedure. Then, I had to take Kyuu over to the PERHILITAN office for the officers to scan the microchip number in order to match it with the details given by the seller. That was extremely stressful for Kyuu and me as the Perhilitan officers did not know how to handle a fennec fox! We ended up opening the small top door of the carrier and tried to aimlessly scan the code while hoping for Kyuu to calm down (that took more than 30 minutes!). After submitting the form for the ownership license, the PERHILITAN top council members held a meeting to decide on the approval of my request. Purchased in January 2019, I had to wait several months for the approval. I received my annual ownership license to own a fennec fox only in July 2019!

There are other memorable experiences that are unique when having a fennec fox as a pet. I still remember how excited I was when I found the advertisement post for Kyuu by the Ipoh pet shop seller on Facebook. Ironically, I was not planning to buy a fennec fox at that time and was



actually looking for a Sulcata tortoise. I just happened to come across his ad and immediately contacted the seller to discuss more. After sleeping on it, I decided to get my first fennec fox and I drove all the way to Ipoh the next evening after work to get him. The first few days were exciting because I had to patiently bond with Kyuu and observe the characteristics of a fennec fox with my own eyes. It was a slow and complicated process but, with my supervision and the help of my cats, Kyuu was comfortable in his new home.

A very recent experience was when a friend of mine forgot to lock the front door of my house and that led to all of my cats and Kyuu running outside! Most people will guess that foxes are smart animals and fast runners. Those two facts are indeed true and that combination makes it extremely difficult to catch them during their active time. During the first few weeks of his arrival, when I let Kyuu roam around the living room, I would spend at least 30 minutes to an hour to catch him in order to place him back inside his room when roaming time was over. Luckily when my fennec fox escaped due to the carelessness of a friend, it was during the afternoon so it only took 15 minutes to capture him and that was after I had received help from 2 neighbours to block and surround the area.

So, from my experiences in owning a fennec fox as a pet, it can be concluded that it is not a suitable animal for beginners and it needs a lot of patience and dedication to understand and appreciate this beautiful desert dwelling creature. Like all other animals, thorough research needs to be done first to consider its habits, diet and other aspects unique to fennec fox care. It is quite difficult to replicate its natural habitat or environment, but good and responsible owners will have to ensure the proper maintenance and sacrifice their money, time and efforts for the wellbeing of a fennec fox. Importantly, owners must also remember that owning this kind of animal is a long-term commitment as fennec foxes may live up to 11 to 14 years in captivity, and it is very irresponsible for owners to sell off their pets once they are bored with them or do not have the capacity or capability to keep them anymore.