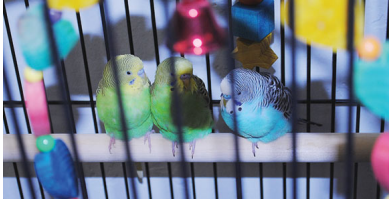


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Parakeets relax in a cage at Don's Custom Aquaria located in the Southgate Mall in Liberal.  
L&T photo/Robert Pierce

By ROBERT PIERCE

• Leader & Times

Looking for an exotic pet, but don't want to travel out of town? Thanks to a new pet store in Liberal's Southgate Mall, many of those animals can now be found right here.

After opening a bait shop on South Kansas Avenue in Liberal in April, Don Small moved the location into the mall in October, and he said his business has basically been "slowly expanding since then."

"We just now got in about 30 animals, most of which are kinda rare," he said.

Small said Don's Custom Aquaria specializes in education about animals.

"Anything that you buy out of our store, we offer a 10 percent discount on if you come and take a short little 30-minute, one-hour care class on it," he said.



The business likewise specializes in obtaining just about any animal, so long as "it's not illegal."

"Most of that is generally overnight," Small said.

Small said Don's can even help potential pet owners obtain the necessary paperwork to own an animal.

"If you have to have a permit to own it, we'll get you in contact with all the right entities," he said.

Small said some people have ordered some animals unique to Southwest Kansas.

"We got somebody an albino alligator about a month back," he said. "We also have some fairly rough stuff here in the shop as well. There's a black rough neck monitor over there. He's our pride and joy. It took us two full months to find him."

Small said his business carries the best deals in the area, and "we can obtain anything."

"We will carry quite a wide selection in the store itself, but the majority of animals will be special ordered," he said.

Small has been keeping reptiles and fish for about two and a half years, and he has a bachelor's in business administration.

"It's nothing for me to learn how to do something," he said.

In addition to animal education, Don's provides other services as well.

"If people have a question about their animal or about any animal in general, we're pretty knowledgeable, and we can find you the right information that you would need," Small said. "We will be offering a small discount for a select veterinarian here in town. We don't know which one it is yet."

Small said the pet store has other supplies for animal friends as well.

"We can get the general care stuff for your animals, some specialty stuff like vitamin supplements, ointments for infections," he said. "Anything prescription would have to be done through a veterinarian."

Small said he looked for three months to find a new location before settling on the Southgate

Mall.

"We've actually done a lot of work down here," he said. "The pond around the corner, we've restored it from the ground up. It wouldn't even hold water when I started on it."

Other pet stores have come and gone recently in Liberal, and Small explained why many such businesses don't seem to make it here.

"They expand out too much with the live animals, and their overhead eats them alive trying to feed everything and trying to clean everything," he said. "Disinfectants aren't cheap."

Small said this is the main reason why the majority of Don's animal selection will be special ordered.

"We don't want to go the way of the other pet stores in town," he said. "We want to be here for a while. This location alone, we're on a seven-year lease, so we will for sure be here for seven years."

Don's does have some common animals, but many are rare.

"They're really hard to obtain, especially out in this area," Small said.

Special discounts will be offered throughout the year, and with the recent announcement that Meade Lake will be stocking trout this winter, bait will be included in those bargains.

"Whenever fishing season comes, we'll be doing a huge bait blowout sale," Small said. "We will still carry stuff for trout this winter."

Don's will offer live bait such as waxed worms and butter worms as well.

Small said most of the animals in the store require relatively easy care and have to be kept warm and inside. He said there is one exception to that rule right now in the store.

"We have a tortoise," he said. "If you start him out in your yard after the last freeze and keep him out there all season, you can bury him before the first freeze, and he'll hibernate."

Don's also has a great selection of snakes and reptiles, including rare iguanas, as well as scorpions.

Small said during summertime, the store's inventory will be expanded just a bit, and he said with orders, shipping will be covered. He added all animals in the store are given at least 10 minutes of handling time each day as part of a taming process.

Small said he wants the business to be a "one-stop shop" where people can leave with an animal and all the necessary supplies to take care of them.

Don's Custom Aquaria is open from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily in the Southgate Mall.

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