

Fantastic beasts and where to keep them

What child (or adult, come to that) hasn't dreamt of having Pegasus, the Psammead or a Phoenix as a pet? Deborah Nicholls-Lee reveals the pros and cons of inviting some of fiction and folklore's favourite creatures into your home



The Lorax, Dr Seuss's defender of the countryside

PERHAPS your farm is missing a fearsome Fairy Dog to keep your livestock in line or you'd like to try your hand at hatching a fork-tongued Cockatrice? Could a winged horse give you the edge in eventing and are they worth the damage they do? Here, we navigate the mythical world of plausible pets and add a few family favourites to the menagerie.

The Cockatrice

Never oversleep again by adding a Cockatrice, with its ear-piercing crow, to your coop. Featuring a cockerel's head, serpent's body and dragon-like wings, this Biblical crossbreed lacks the charm of the traditional farmhouse rooster, but its fiercely territorial nature does mean that it doubles as an effective intruder deterrent. One legend tells of a Cockatrice terrorising the Hampshire village of Wherwell and feasting on human flesh. Furthermore, as noted by Shakespeare

in *Richard III*, its 'unavoided eye is murderous'. Unless you want to make garden statues of your house visitors, the creature must be blindfolded, as its stare causes petrification. By some accounts, its breath and its touch are also deadly. If you are undeterred by these shortcomings, you can hatch your own Cockatrice by finding a chicken's egg that has been laid on a full moon and incubating it using a toad or a snake.

The Phoenix

Pet bereavements and vet's bills are no more with the everlasting Phoenix, a bird that can live for hundreds of years and will rise again from the ashes of your inglenook fireplace should the Grim Reaper try to cut it down. As large as an eagle and with spectacular red-and-gold plumage, the Phoenix is a showy addition to any courtyard if you can coax it down from the spice-lined nest that you'll need to create for it in a palm tree. The family of Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts and the founder of the Order of the Phoenix, has kept company with Phoenixes for generations. 'They can carry immensely heavy loads, their tears have healing powers, and they make highly faithful pets,' Dumbledore explains in *Harry Potter*

Right: Beware the 'murderous' stare of a Cockatrice.

Far right: The everlasting Phoenix

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Flight of fancy: Pegasus, the Winged Horse by Fortunino Matania—the white stallion is the offspring of Medusa and the god Poseidon

and the Chamber of Secrets. Before being popularised by Greek culture, tales of the Phoenix originated in Egypt and this would be the best starting point for any search to secure one. Pick up a palm tree at the same time.

The Lorax

If you have land that could be working harder for the planet and you are used to dealing

with capable, but occasionally cantankerous staff, it's worth calling on the services of the bushy-whiskered Lorax, a staunch defender of the countryside that fled when its homeland's fluffy-topped Truffula trees were felled to make industrial quantities of shapeless knitwear. In his 1971 children's book, Dr Seuss describes the eponymous creature as 'shortish and oldish and brownish and

mossy' and speaking 'with a voice that was sharpish and bossy'. Claiming to 'speak for the trees', the scruffy-looking Lorax could be a galvanising figure in the movement to reverse climate change, but it is also inclined to obsessively rewild your country estate. To have the best chance of finding a Lorax and obtaining a seed to re-create its natural, Truffula-rich habitat, seek the advice of →



Purity and power: a rare sighting of the Unicorn, equipped with its healing horn, in *A unicorn and a stag in a field of flowers*, about 1500



You wish: the Psammead in the 2004 film adaptation of E. Nesbit's *Five Children and It*

the Once-ler up high in his Lerkim. Next, simply grow your own Truffula forest and 'protect it from the axes that hack/Then the Lorax and all of his friends will come back'.

Pegasus

The progeny of Medusa, the snake-haired seductress, and Poseidon, the god of horses, sea and natural disasters, it is a miracle that Pegasus, the winged white stallion, turned out so benign. From Corinthian Chimera-killer Bellerophon to the animated She-Ra Princess of Power, the horse appears to tolerate a range of riders. Stabling is likely to be costly, as conventional fencing is futile when faced with a flying beast—and the steed's tendency to create springs of water from its hooves could leave you with waterlogged fields—but, on the plus side, Pegasus could cut quite a dash at Pony Club and eventing could be interesting with the added vertical lift. As Pegasus was born from the ocean when the sea's foam combined with his mother's blood, the chances of breeding your own avian equine are remote. Aslan turned the cab horse Strawberry into Fledge, the new land's first winged horse, in C. S. Lewis's 'Chronicles of Narnia', so the largest wardrobe in the house could offer the best lead.

The Psammead

If you have sand dunes or a gravel pit close to your home and you're rather down on your luck, it's worth keeping an eye out for a Psammead:

a prehistoric sand-fairy who grants wishes that last until sunset. The vain, grumpy being is thousands of years old and became part of the public consciousness when reports of its appearance in the Kent countryside featured in E. Nesbit's *Five Children and It* in 1902. 'Its eyes were on long horns like a snail's eyes, and it could move them in and out like telescopes,' writes Nesbit. 'It had ears like a bat's ears, and its tubby body was shaped like a spider's and covered with thick soft fur; its legs and arms were furry too, and it had hands and feet like a monkey's.' The Psammead is a creature of habit, residing in the same spot since the dinosaurs, so there's no need to capture it—but choose your wishes wisely or expect to be taught a lesson.

Cù-sìth (Fairy Dog)

To acquire a guard dog of unparalleled ferocity, head to the Scottish Highlands and seek out the lair of the spectral Cù-sìth in the rocky clefts and caves of the region's densest forests. There's no mistaking this wolf-like apparition the size of a cow, with its ghoulish



Above: Cù-sìth, the fearsome Fairy Dog of the Scottish Highlands. Below: The Gruffalo

green coat, coiled or braided tail and eyes that glow yellow. No dog trainer can hope to tame this belligerent beast, so tasks such as herding livestock are out of the question.

In fact, potential owners would need to keep the Cù-sìth not only chained, but muzzled, as the hound has a sinister

the mouse had described. Feared by foxes, owls and snakes, the Gruffalo would be an asset to any poultry farmer or keeper of small game looking to ward off predators. To keep the Gruffalo committed to the job, we'd recommend a regular supply of mice, which he declares his 'favourite food', preferably served on bread. Accommodation-wise, you'll need, suggests Mrs Donaldson, a 'deep dark wood'. Despite his fearsome appearance and monstrous size, the Gruffalo's low IQ makes him easy to outwit and, therefore, ideal for domestication.

The Unicorn

Representing purity and power, the majestic white Unicorn features widely in Scottish heraldry and, although there's a risk it will pierce the roof of your horsebox, this equine would make a wonderful family mascot or companion animal for Pegasus. The health of your household is assured, as simply touching the Unicorn's horn heals wounds, both mental and physical. The horn is also said to purify water—a handy resource, perhaps, for owners with greening swimming pools or bothersome private drainage. The horn's high value on the black market makes the Unicorn attractive to poachers, so there are costs to bear regarding security. Advice varies on what to feed your unicorn and, although some dubious sources recommend glitter or 'candy corn that grows on rainbows', most experts agree that a herbivorous diet is best. Unicorn sightings are sadly rare, but reports of one in the Forbidden Forest are worth investigating. Take the train from Platform 9¾ at London's King's Cross station and alight at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. 🐾

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three-bark warning system, with the third howl so loud and terrifying that the sound alone has the power to kill. Farmers may be interested to learn that water containing the tooth of a Cù-sìth is alleged to cure all manner of bovine ailments—some compensation for the havoc that the brute would wreak on the herd, given half a chance.

The Gruffalo

Once thought to be a fictional character invented by a slick-talking mouse, Julia Donaldson's *Gruffalo* (1999) surprised everyone when the orange-eyed, purple-prickled beast emerged from the forest with the very 'terrible tusks and terrible claws'

