

# Reptilian and Amphibian Ambulatory Practice Challenges and Opportunities



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## KEYWORDS

- Amphibian • Reptilian • Herpetological medicine • Reptiles • Amphibians
- Ambulatory veterinary medicine • Mobile veterinary practice

## KEY POINTS

- Herpetoculture has exploded in popularity since the 1980s and has evolved dramatically since. Veterinarians have kept pace clinically, but should also consider other ways to meet the needs of this unique and changing patient demographic.
- An ambulatory visit represents a nontraditional “farm call,” so that population health can be assessed; modern herpetoculture lends itself well to this approach.
- Ambulatory practice offers unique clinical, economic, psychological, and logistical benefits to veterinarians and owners of reptilian and amphibian patients.
- Safety, preparedness, scheduling, and billing can be hurdles for the reptilian and amphibian ambulatory practitioner, but they bring opportunities too.
- Although some services are offered more effectively through a standing facility, many procedures on reptiles and amphibians can be performed on an ambulatory basis.

## INTRODUCTION

Herpetoculture, defined here as the collection and propagation of live reptiles and amphibians in captivity, has evolved tremendously over the past few decades. Perhaps the most satisfying change observed by veterinarians has been a slow paradigm shift in the public away from the notion that reptiles and amphibians are disposable pets.<sup>1</sup> To the contrary, many are long-lived, intelligent, and well-suited to healthy captive lifestyles with proper care, so it is not surprising that there has been a massive increase in their popularity, and in captive breeding efforts by private keepers. These efforts, combined with many advances in reptile and amphibian medicine and surgery, including the establishment of the Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarians

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(ARAV) in 1990 and a dedicated board specialty in reptile and amphibian practice through the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners (ABVP) in 2010, have helped elevate herptiles from second-class pets to fixtures in elaborate collections that are growing and thriving.

Likely the most dramatic, measurable shift since the 1980s has been a trend toward larger and more diverse private herpetological collections. A practice once restricted to zoologic and museum collections is now frequently encountered in the home or as part of a small business. In 2009, there were an estimated 4.7 million US households that owned 13.6 million reptile pets, and the years prior, between 1994 and 2008, saw 68% growth in the number of those households.<sup>2</sup> Herpetoculture has undoubtedly continued its exponential growth in the decade since.

Although there are certainly clients that casually keep only one or a few individual reptiles or amphibians, it is increasingly common to find private keepers who view their animals as a collection of scientifically or economically important “specimens” rather than strictly as pets<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 1). For keepers with these types of collections, the traditional small animal practice model may be unaccommodating at best, and sometimes even objectionable, with some keepers preferring to forego veterinary care rather than spend time and money with a hospital they feel is incapable of meeting their needs. As herpetoculture continues to grow in popularity, and as keeping practices evolve, veterinarians must remain flexible to meet the changing needs of this patient population and the clients who tend it. Offering ambulatory services represents an innovative way for practitioners to meet these needs and evolve alongside this growing demographic.

Although offering ambulatory service may revolutionize the way one practices medicine, ambulatory practice for exotics is not a novel concept. D. Johnson, DVM, Dipl. ABVP (ECM), noted (written communication, December 2017) that some of the very first exotics-exclusive practices more than 20 years ago actually began as ambulatory practices. With minimal infrastructure and overhead, this form of practice was less expensive to operate compared with brick-and-mortar practices. Indeed, one of the authors (RSF) started an exclusively exotics ambulatory practice in Florida in 1990, with more than 90% of the patients being reptiles and amphibians. For more



**Fig. 1.** It is increasingly common for private keepers of reptiles and amphibians to maintain large, elaborate collections. This herpetoculturist keeps an exquisite collection of captive-bred green tree pythons (*Morelia viridis*) in her home. (Courtesy of Bradley J. Waffa, MSPH, DVM, Raleigh, NC.)

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