

OVERVIEW

The spunky Roborovski, or simply "Robo" is the smallest of the dwarf hamsters and perhaps the most personable. These hamsters are known scientifically as *Phodopus roborovskii* and inhabit the arid steppes and deserts of Mongolia, southeastern Russia and adjacent China and Kazakhstan. Most active at dusk and dawn (crepuscular), Robos are energetic and fast-moving and can make endearing pets. They are less likely to bite than their larger dwarf hamster cousins in the genus *Phodopus* (Djungarian and Russian or Campbell's), but can be shy and skittish. At least ten coat varieties are now recognized and selectively bred for. The normal or wild-type is an agouti-coated animal with white eyebrow-like spots. Unlike the other two *Phodopus* species, they have no dark vertebral stripe. The most popular of the coat variations is the husky or white-faced, which has a mostly white face and a paler, often orangish, coat, and the marbled or mottled, which is a pied coat with irregular patches of white across the body, head and, occasionally, the face.

HOUSING

An aquarium outfitted with a secure metal-framed screen top may be the best housing for these diminutive rodents, but a wire cage with very narrow bar spacing may also be used except for breeding pairs since young will escape. New cages specifically designed for dwarf hamsters, basically miniature versions of the popular tube network Syrian hamster cages, are also available and very popular. They provide an interesting landscape that features wheels and tubes that are psychologically beneficial. Even though these are the smallest of the hamsters, purchase the largest size you can accommodate. Any housing filled with a couple inches of processed paper bedding (e.g. CareFRESH®) or aspen shavings. **DO NOT USE PINE OR CEDAR SHAVINGS.** These soft woods have toxic "aromatic" oils that are harmful to small rodents.

Robos are full of energy and should be provided with a dwarf hamster "mini" or "small" size of the familiar hamster wheel or a similar exercise method. The new plastic saucer-style "wheels" are safer and quieter. There is an endless variety of hamster shelters, mazes and toys on the market to provide enrichment for the pet Robo. Even a simple paper towel or toilet paper tube makes a welcome diversion and can be shredded into nesting material.

FOOD & WATER

All hamsters should be fed a quality "lab block" rodent diet. These diets provide complete nutrition in every bite and wear down the teeth. Seed mixes are nutritionally poor as they allow a chosen favorite seed (often fatty sunflower seeds) to make up the bulk of the diet and should not be used. Dwarf hamsters are omnivorous and may also take some cereals, nuts vegetables and animal matter such as mealworms or bits of cooked poultry for occasional variety. **Do not switch from a lab diet to a seed mix!** Water should be provided via a ball-tip water bottle.

GROOMING

Robos are desert dwellers and keep their coats clean by rolling in dusty sand. Sound familiar? Yes, this is what a chinchilla does, and a small, shallow dish of chinchilla dust powder is excellent for keeping a Robo's fur shiny and clean. It may take some time for a Robo to become familiar with it, and it may use it when you're not watching, but eventually it will contribute to a Robo's health.

Consult an exotic animal veterinarian for treatment of any pet condition or illness.

HEALTH

Dwarf hamsters do not have many health problems when housed and fed correctly. The most likely problem to encounter is fur mites, which will cause itching, bald patches and skin problems. These may be treated with anti-mite sprays designed for small animals and/or caged birds in conjunction with a thorough cleaning and disinfection of the housing, shelters and toys, and frequent replacement of bedding. Consult your vet for more information.

MORE INFO

A nice website devoted exclusively to Robos may be found at <http://roborovskihamsters.webs.com>.