

Alumna's 'tiny zoo' aims to quell fears about creepy creatures

By Kathy Quirk APRIL 11, 2023 CAMPUS & COMMUNITY ALUMNI
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Tatiana Gritsevskiy holds Dipper, a ball python, one of 23 creatures in her home menagerie. (UWM Photo/Elora Hennessey)

Forget about the canary in the coal mine.

Reptiles and amphibians are excellent guides – indicator species – showing the initial impacts of long-term environmental change. That's why it's important for people to overcome the stigma often attached to these “creepy crawlies” and get to know them, said Tatiana Gritsevskiy, a UWM alumna who is working to educate people about the importance of reptiles, amphibians and insects in the world's ecosystems.

Gritsevskiy earned her degree in conservation and environmental sciences in 2019 with a double minor in biology and geography. She has developed a business, [Tatiana's Tiny Zoo](#), to share her love of the creatures that some people find scary or icky and educate them on how to adopt and/or care for them.

“They’re misunderstood. Many people have negative attitudes toward them,” Gritsevskiy said. Her collection of pets includes tarantulas, millipedes, a ball python, a boa constrictor, a poison dart frog, a blue tongued skink, a few garter snakes and other reptiles, amphibians and insects.



A blue tongued skink named Eponine is part of Gritsevskiy’s collection. (UWM Photo/Elora Hennessey)

Tatiana’s Tiny Zoo grew out of her interest in educating people about the roles these creatures play in the ecosystem. She goes out to classrooms, libraries, Scout meetings, pet stores, senior centers, birthday parties and anywhere else where there’s an interest in learning and enjoying some hands-on activities. She even took part in Milwaukee Comic Con, sharing her work as a volunteer for Reptile Rescue.

“I always loved animals and nature when I was growing up,” she said. In high school, she worked at a pet store in Mequon. When it came

time for college, she originally thought she might enroll in a pre-veterinary program. However, after working in a vet clinic, she decided she wasn't cut out to be a vet herself. That led her to UWM and the conservation program.

However, the pandemic affected opportunities in the field.

Popular YouTube channel

When she lost her job and was isolated from most of the rest of the world, she decided to set up an educational [YouTube channel](#) about the natural history, care and feeding of both the unusual critters she'd collected herself and others around the world. She'd started out as a film major at UWM, so the channel, which now has more than 3,000 followers, was a good fit with her skills. From there, the business of doing presentations took off two years ago. She also works at the Hawthorn Glen nature preserve, designing and presenting educational programs.

Her personal zoo grew along with her interests.

"I started out with a gecko, then another snake, and it just sort of spiraled from there." Today, Gritsevskiy has 23 creatures, including a couple "regular" pets like a dog and an elderly ferret, which aren't part of the zoo. She also has a very understanding landlord who doesn't mind that her second bedroom is now the reptile room. Gritsevskiy said she is careful to follow all city and other regulations on the numbers and types of pets allowed.

If she does a presentation that's interactive, she brings some of the creatures with her to share. For example, a ball python that she's had for seven years since it was a baby is very "socialized," she said, and enjoys being part of the show.

Clients enthusiastic

Clients are enthusiastic about the visits.

“We were so happy to welcome Tatiana and her Tiny Zoo to the Milwaukee Center for Independence,” said Erin Dentice, supervisor-life services at the organization. “Our clients thoroughly enjoyed getting to know the animals. Pet therapy positively impacts our clients’ energy levels, self-esteem, and mood.”

When Gritsevskiy was at UWM, she said, she was very shy about speaking up in class, but now her YouTube features and public presentations have helped her become much more outgoing and confident.

“It’s been a great experience running my own business.”