

# Crazy critters crowd plush animal kingdom

If you're in the market for a stuffed animal there's a lot more to choose from than teddy bears and floppy-eared dogs.

At a store called the Stuffed Safari in Farmington Hills one can choose from a selection of 3,000 different stuffed animals — literally everything from alligators to zebras.

The alligator is dressed preppy, complete with an "Imann" sport shirt bearing the likeness of a man.

One of the current big sellers at the store is a stuffed vulture — just the thing for a little one to snuggle with before sleep. The plush scavenger sells for \$14.50.

"We go through vultures like you wouldn't believe," says store employee Connie Churilla, 19, daughter of store owners Tom and Kathy Churilla of Utica. "Why? Because it's different."

Other "different" animals found in the store include hedgehogs, moles, walrus, anteaters, birds, bees, whales, giraffes, turtles that go back into their shells and even lay eggs that hatch into baby turtles. There are caterpillars that can be unzipped and turned inside out to form a colorful butterfly.

Oh, and then there's the tadpole that turns into a frog. You start to wonder — is this a stuffed animal store or a science project?

SOME OF the more imaginative stuffed animals — such as the ones that metamorphose — carry a high price tag but one can also find characters selling for under \$5 in the store.

There are also teddy bears — lots of teddy bears, even prestigious imported teddy bears. One of the best selling teddy bears is also one of the oldest, say Churilla. It is made by Steiff Toys of W. Germany. Much like collectable dolls, Steiff teddy bears often come in limited editions like a \$275 set with mohair plush and hand-stitched claws.

While that item may be out of your price range it doesn't cost anything to look and the Churillas encourage customers to handle the merchandise. Churilla says she decides whether to buy a stuffed animal by squeezing it.

"Some are stuffed with straw and there's that crunch when you squeeze them," she says. "That's not what someone's looking for in a stuffed animal, I don't think, unless it's just for display. You've gotta squeeze him to know you've got the right one."

While the current trend in stuffed animal buying is toward exotic animals, Churilla says bears are always a big item, particularly among adult collec-



Garfield, the comic strip cat, is one of the hottest-selling stuffed animals in the country and at the Stuffed Safari.



Imagine cuddling up to a vulture. But that's just the ticket for many stuffed animal-lovers tired of teddy bears.

Staff photos by  
Randy Borst

tors. And the second biggest selling stuffed animal is dogs.

"DOGS ARE probably people's most popular pet," says Churilla. "Here the Dobermans and schnauzers have been very popular. The Doberman was the first animal we ever sold."

People tend to buy stuffed animals that look like a pet they own or used to own, she said.

To lend credence to that claim, Michelle Pulver, 8, of West Bloomfield, cuddled a stuffed grey poodle that, she said, "reminds me of my dog." Besides, she says, "it has a sweet face."

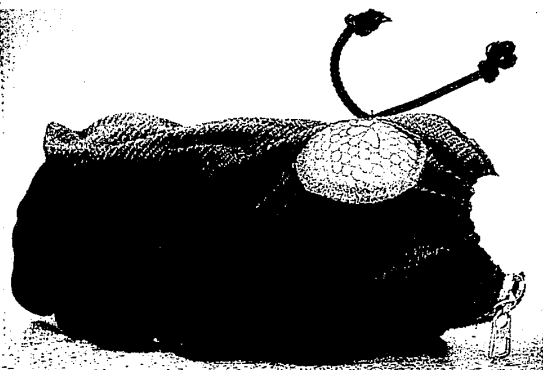
Cuteness has a great deal to do with most sales, said customers. It's a quality hard to define but apparently is in the eye of the beholder. Jacquie Pulver says that's why she picked the baby seal as her favorite animal in the store. "Cuz he's cute and he looks a little like my dad." Her friends giggled at the thought.

One-year-old Gabriel Yashinsky of Southfield smiled at the Felix the Cat character in the store because he's got one at home, says his mom, Debbie. Sometimes an item that catches her son's fancy in the store falls flat at home.

I remember when he was just an infant we took him to an expensive department store — Saks," she related. "He was attracted by a clown, a very expensive clown. We bought it but it didn't have the same impact at home."



Golly Bear is tested for its cuddly quotient by Kathy Churilla, owner of the Stuffed Safari which opened in July at Hunter's Square shopping center.



It's a cute little corduroy caterpillar in this stage. But grab the zipper under its belly and...



The transformation to butterfly is complete, demonstrated by Connie Churilla, daughter of the owners. There are also stuffed tadpoles which turn into frogs.

SEPTEMBER

12 SUNDAY

13 MONDAY

14 TUESDAY

15 WEDNESDAY *Stanley Sherman*

16 THURSDAY

17 FRIDAY

18 SATURDAY

FALL  
FASHION  
PREVIEW

Presenting one of your favorites... Stanley Sherman at Hudson's Northland. A representative will be on hand to present his new fall collection for '82 at an informal fashion show of great American looks. The Woodward Shops, Wednesday, September 15 from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

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