



I Want a Ferret!

Ferrets are small furry members of the weasel family, with relatives of wolverines, ermines, and minks. Their path to domestication started about 2,500 years ago in Europe. People used polecats (today's ferrets) on ships to control rodent populations and to pull rabbits out of holes when hunting. It was also when the practice began of removing a ferret's scent glands to eliminate their pungent, musky odor.

Today ferrets are among the top five most popular pets. They are also shown and judged at shows connected to a national organization like dogs and cats. Dogs have the American Kennel Club (AKC), and for ferrets, it is the American Ferret Association. Some states have a local chapter like the Minnesota Ferret Association. Despite being domesticated long ago, Ferrets are illegal as pets in the U.S. states of California and Hawaii.

Life Span

Ferrets live, on average, five to seven years in captivity as pets. The oldest on record lived to 14 years of age. Their cousins in the wild, called Black-Footed ferrets, live twice as long, with an average life span of 15 years. In places like Montana, ferrets were brought back from the brink of extinction with breeding programs.



Veterinarians and researchers have documented the shorter life span of pet ferrets due to early sterilization by breeders. It causes disease, with Cancer or Adrenal Gland Disease being the most prevalent. Some can be treated with medications and extend a ferret's life for months or even a year.

Behavior

Ferrets are very curious creatures and love to explore everything! They wake up with bursts of energy, take off like a rocket and continue going nonstop for a period. Then they will suddenly crash anywhere and fall asleep for their average sleep time of 20 hours per day. They are very sound sleepers to the point at times, and it may seem they are dead since a simple shake may not awaken them.



Ferrets love to steal and hide things like socks or rubber objects. They will frequently move them so you cannot find the object. Ferrets love crawling through just about anything- cardboard boxes, PVC piping, clothes dryer hoses, paper bags, and even pant legs or long shirt sleeves.

You will often hear ferret owners say, 'if the head fits, the body fits'. It refers to the fact that ferrets have very flexible spines. They can flatten themselves enough to squeeze into nearly any space. The size of their head is the only limitation. That is why you need to 'ferret proof' the areas of your home where your ferret will have access. Ferrets should not be able to go into, underneath, or behind appliances, including clothes dryers, washers, stoves, refrigerators, etc. It can lead to death from squeezing into motors or chewing electrical wires.



How Many

Ferrets are also very social animals and do best when you have more than one. Whether purchasing or adopting, it is best to consider getting at least two for the ferrets' mental health. Like all animals, each has its own

personality, which sometimes conflicts with cage mates. Be prepared to keep them caged separately initially and introduce them slowly.

Cautions

Ferrets are chewers! They like to chew items made of rubber or plastic-like electrical cords and foam, including Nerf balls. If ingested, the substance can cause an obstruction that blocks their digestive tract and lead to severe illness or even death.



Ferrets and small children also do not mix well. Due to the flexible spines, they can suffer back injuries from small children lifting up a ferret and dropping it. They need to be handled appropriately.

Ferrets also have a musky odor. No matter how many times you bathe a ferret, they will have the smell from oils in the skin that will never completely disappear. This scent is much worse in ferrets that a veterinarian has not descented. Most ferrets you buy from pet shops like Petco or Petsmart have already had it done. However, if you purchase one from a breeder, it is best to ask.

Other Ferret Fun Facts

- From 1860 to the start of World War II, ferrets were widely used in the American West to protect grain stores from rodents. They gained popularity as pets in the 1980s and 90s.
- The name "ferret" is derived from the Latin word *furittus*, meaning "little thief."
- An intact female ferret is a jill, and a spayed female is a sprite.
- An intact male is called a hob, and a neutered male is a gib.
- Baby ferrets (less than one year old) are called kits. A group of ferrets is a business or fesnyng.
- All kits are born with white fur and get their adult color at three weeks of age.



To learn more about ferrets, contact the American Ferret Association or MN Ferret Associations.