Ferret Ownership: In-Depth

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Have you ever looked at a ferret in a pet store and wondered what it would be like to own one? Or perhaps you have a friend who owns a ferret, and you've become curious about what kind of pet a ferret would be. The following is some basic ferret information - from the history of the ferret, to feeding requirements, to playtimes - to give you an idea of what ferret ownership will be like.

History

It's a common misconception that ferrets are rodents. In fact, ferrets are in the *Mustelid* family along with otters, mink, weasels, and polecats. They have been domesticated for over 2,000 years, and their duties have included hunting rabbits, vermin control, running cable and wire through small spaces (there is even a rumor that ferrets ran video cabling for the wedding of Princess Diana and Prince Charles) and, of course, companionship.

What are they like as pets?

Personality

Ferrets are very intelligent and highly curious, which can lead to some frustrating moments for unprepared ferret owners! They require training and lots of interaction with humans for proper socialization. Ferrets are social animals that bond with their owners and their fellow ferret cage mates.

Living Arrangements

Many ferret owners in England and Europe keep their ferrets outdoors, but that practice is rare in the United States. This is because heartworm disease, canine distemper, and rabies are common diseases in the U.S., and ferrets can develop all of these. Another reason why ferrets do better inside is because they are extremely prone to heatstroke, and any temperature above 75°F can be dangerous. Ferrets are

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safest and most comfortable at 65°-68°F.

It is very important that a ferret has a safe and secure cage, like the Ferret Nation. For a single ferret, the smallest cage you put him in should be no less than 3 ft long by 2 ft high. Obviously, a bigger cage is better. If you have multiple ferrets, you will need a multi-level cage.

Supplies You Will Need

The following ferret products are necessities:

- Water bottle or bowl
- Food bowl
- Bedding - hammocks, blankets, and sleep sacks (such as the Hanging Ferret Nap Sack)
- Litter box and ferret safe litter (such as Marshall Ferret Litter), and a Litter Scoop
- Toys- tunnels, balls, and other enrichment toys

We recommend that you use bowls and litter boxes that attach to the cage whenever possible. Ferrets like to rearrange their cages, which can make quite a mess! Cage clips allow you to attach any litter pan to your ferret's cage if it does not include attachment hardware.

Grooming

Ferrets are fairly easy when it comes to grooming, but this definitely isn't something you want to slack on. Regular grooming you will need to do includes:

- Clipping nails - failure to do this can result in the ferret tearing a nail or breaking a toe.
- Cleaning ears - not cleaning your ferret's ears regularly makes them more at risk to get ear infections.
- Brushing teeth (Finger toothbrushes) - poor dental hygiene can lead to your ferret developing any number of bacterial infections or diseases.
- Flea prevention and treatment - if your ferret does develop fleas, treat them as soon as possible. Flea anemia is a very real threat.

While bathing can be a part of grooming, it is not a vital part like those listed above. Over-bathing strips essential oils from your ferret's coat, causing him to overproduce oils in an attempt to correct the imbalance. The overproduction of oils leaves your ferret smellier and itchier. How often you bathe your ferret is up to you, but bathing is not recommended any more than once a month.

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Diet

Ferrets are obligate carnivores - this means that they must get their nutrients from animal protein and fat. They cannot digest and have no need for vegetable protein. Choose foods and treats that are meat based, and avoid fruits and vegetables. Also avoid any food or treat that has a high sugar content. Food should have no less than 35% protein and around 20% fat. Treats should always be fed in moderation, no matter what the ingredients.

Veterinary Care

Find a knowledgeable ferret veterinarian who has experience with both basic ferret care and health issues. Your ferret will need vaccines for canine distemper. Accepted ferret vaccines for CD are Purevax and Galaxy-D, and the vaccine for rabies is Imrab-3.

It is very likely that your ferret will have some medical emergencies, so in addition to finding a qualified ferret veterinarian, you will also need to have contact information for a 24 hour emergency veterinary hospital as well. You will probably want to locate at least two, since they may not always have a ferret veterinarian on call.

Playtime

Ferrets are incredibly playful creatures, and not just with toys - your ferret's favorite toy will inevitably be you! Your ferret will need at least four hours out of his cage each day, at least two hours of which should be spent interacting with you. Avoid toys that have parts, or are made of materials your ferret could chew off and swallow.

Interesting ferret behavior

During playtime, your ferret will probably start to bounce around excitedly, dancing towards you and away from you, jumping up and down with stiff legs, and running into things. This is affectionately known by ferret owners as the "happy weasel war dance," and it's completely normal behavior! It's just your ferret's way of trying to entice you to play with him.

Safety

Because they're so curious, ferrets can easily get themselves into situations that are dangerous for them. Before letting your ferret out to play, always make sure that the area in which he will be playing is "ferretproofed." Use Cord Protectors on all electrical cords.

One thing you need to remember - ferretproofing is an ongoing process, so do it each and every time you let your ferret out of his cage!

So is a ferret the right pet for you?

If all of these aspects of ferret ownership sound like things you can manage, then a ferret may be a good pet for you. However, it's important to understand that owning a ferret is a major responsibility. They have an average life span of 7 to 10 years, and can be high-maintenance pets. Even if everything mentioned in this article sounds like it would be easy to handle, remember that you aren't ready for a ferret if you aren't ready for the time and monetary commitments.

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