

Ferrets

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Natural History

Domestic ferrets (*Mustela putorius furo*) are small carnivores belonging to the family Mustelidae, which includes badgers, weasels, otters, wolverines, and mink. Mustelids share the common characteristics of a long body, relatively short legs, musky smell, and big attitude. Their scientific name translates roughly to “stinky little mouse eating thief”, which is a very accurate description for these small predators. The domestic ferret is distinct from the highly endangered black footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*) and diverged from the European polecat (*Mustela putorius*) at least 2500 years ago, although they are still capable of interbreeding. European polecats were originally domesticated by humans for use as hunters, but have also been used for vermin control, running wires, medical research, fur farming, and of course, companionship. Ferrets are still used as vermin control and rabbit hunters (a sport called “ferreting”) in some parts of the world, but are almost exclusively pets in the United States as hunting with ferrets is prohibited. In parts of the UK, a sport called ferret-legging can be found in the occasional pub, and involves tying a pair of pants to trap a ferret within and time how long an individual can stand the biting and scrambling. US ferrets are primarily produced by the company Marshall Farms. Private breeders are less common, but growing in popularity due to health concerns associated with commercially bred ferrets.

Characteristics and Behavior

Ferrets are curious, mischievous, and clownish. They sleep much of the day, up to 18-20 hours, but when they are awake, they are very awake and require extensive stimulation. Ferrets are crepuscular, meaning they are most active at dawn and dusk. They have a reputation for being bitey, but generally learn bite inhibition just as well as a dog as they grow out of their juvenile stage. However, ferret teeth are very sharp and they have a surprisingly powerful bite for their size. Like all members of the mustelid family, ferrets also possess a musky odor. The vast majority of US ferrets are “descented” prior to purchase, but this does not eliminate their natural odor. Descenting involves removing a ferret’s scent glands (anal glands), which they can use to release a pungent odor when stressed. Ferrets still give off a natural odor, which may be too strong for some individuals. Intact ferrets tend to have a much stronger odor than desexed ferrets.

Despite their long naps, ferrets are high maintenance animals. They require extensive enrichment and interaction, and easily grow bored. They are surprisingly nimble climbers and can easily squeeze through any opening that their heads can fit through, making them accomplished escape artists. Ferrets also have a very short GI transit time, which translates to frequent defecation. While ferrets are naturally latrine animals, meaning they eliminate in a common area (usually corners), they are rarely 100% litter trained. While they will choose to use their litter box more often than not, a ferret cannot be counted on to cross a room, let alone multiple rooms to find their litter box. They will eliminate in the nearest corner before finding their way back to their litter box. Owners should also be aware that ferrets are thieves. Anything that can be stolen by a ferret, will be stolen. They cache their treasure under beds, dressers, or other tight spaces.

Lifespan

5-7 years is average.

Adult Size

600-2000 grams with males larger than females.

Housing

Ferrets require a large amount of space and do best when housed with at least one other ferret (a group of ferrets is called a “business”). When unsupervised, ferrets must be kept in either a secure cage or a ferret-proofed room. They are very prone to getting into trouble, particularly eating toys or other household items. Large, multi-tiered cages such as the Critter Nation are appropriate for ferrets. Cages should be as large as possible and furnished with hammocks, ferret safe toys, litter boxes, sleep sacks, and other enrichment items. Wire bottoms should be avoided, as these can injure your ferret’s feet. Fleece makes an excellent bottom for a ferret cage. Towels can be used with caution, but be aware that threads can trap toes or even be ingested. It is not recommended to cover the bottom of the cage with bedding (except for enrichment purposes) as the ferret will most likely just make a mess of it and eliminate more indiscriminately. Cedar and pine should be avoided if loose substrate is used. Litter boxes with a paper based litter should be placed in corners. Do not use clay based cat litters as this can be very irritating to a ferret’s respiratory tract. It is best to watch where your ferret tries to eliminate and set up the litter box according to their preference, rather than try to coerce them into a particular corner. Sometimes, dropping food in areas where you don’t want them to eliminate can help prevent inappropriate toilet use, as they do not want to eliminate where they eat. Also be sure to thoroughly clean up messes with an enzymatic cleaner.

Ferrets love to dig and hide in dark places. Blankets, sleep sacks, and other ferret specific bedding should be provided. There should be at least 1 sleeping space per ferret. Even though ferrets seem to prefer sleeping in a pile, they should be able to have their own space if they wish. Any toys left unsupervised with a ferret should not have pieces that the ferret can chew off and swallow. Cages are a great resting spot for ferrets, but out of cage time is required daily.

Feeding

There is a lot of debate on how best to feed ferrets. They are obligate carnivores that require high protein, moderate fat, and low fiber diets. A high carbohydrate diet is thought to contribute to the development of insulinomas (insulin producing tumors). Raw diets are becoming popular, but there are public health concerns, along with possible malnutrition concerns. Raw food diets are never appropriate for households that have immunocompromised individuals, and it is best to consult with a veterinary nutritionist to ensure that a home prepared diet is balanced. Whole prey diets may be the most biologically appropriate for a ferret, but there are numerous contamination concerns that may make them unsafe or impractical. Ferrets will hide parts of their meals, which can be problematic for any kind of raw meats that are left out. Diets exclusively comprised of skeletal meat are associated with calcium deficiencies and should be avoided. A ferret specific kibble has less risk of contamination and is often more manageable for owners. Additionally, there do not appear to be any reports of malnutrition on any quality commercial kibble, as long as additional supplements are not overfed. Therefore, it appears to be more appropriate to feed high quality kibble at this time. A high protein, low carb cat food such as a diabetic diet is sometimes fed, but ferret foods such as Wysong, Totally Ferret, or Mazuri are preferred. This author chooses to feed Wysong Digestive Support and has had good success. Avoid pea protein, as this ingredient has been associated with urinary stone formation.

When selecting a diet, protein should be 30-35%, fat 15-30%, and the calcium:phosphorus ratio at least 1:1 (phosphorus should not be higher than calcium). Grocery store feline diets with high amounts of cereal grains have also been associated with bladder stone formation in ferrets and should be avoided. It is unclear what percentage of carbohydrates a ferret can tolerate but a diet should not be higher in carbs than protein. Cats can tolerate up to 40% carbohydrates in their diet, and ferrets are less able to digest carbs, indicating that they likely cannot tolerate such high amounts. The first ingredients in a ferret diet should be meat based (meat, by products,

and/or meat meal). There are no reports of vitamin or mineral deficiencies in quality kibble diets.

Due to their short GI transit time, ferrets either need to be free fed or fed frequently. When allowed free access, ferrets eat an average of 10 meals per day. It is uncommon for ferrets to become pathologically obese when free fed. It is normal for ferrets to increase their food consumption in the winter and gain weight. Puzzle feeders or automatic feeders may be used for particularly difficult individuals that are not able to self-regulate. Ferrets should not go more than a few hours without food. This is especially important for individuals with insulinomas, who can have episodes of low blood sugar if they do not have food access. Ferrets form strong food preferences at a young age and may be extremely reluctant to accept new diets as they age. Therefore, it is recommended to expose them to a variety of foods with different textures, smells, and protein sources when young.

Water

Fresh water should always be provided. Ferrets often prefer bowls over drinkers, but some ferrets will choose to dig in their water bowl rather than drink from it.

Sexing

It is very straightforward to tell male and female ferrets apart. The male's penis is apparent on his abdomen, and sometimes confused for a bellybutton.

Handling

Ferrets are very social and curious, often forming strong bonds with their owners. They are generally not cuddly, but may enjoy napping in their owner's lap after a play session. In general, ferrets don't like to be restrained. They tolerate handling well and are not likely to bite, but they usually squirm if held in one place for too long. Their nails are sharp and fast growing, and they certainly can bite if stressed, so it is not recommended that young children handle them. Ferrets are hardy but injuries can occur if they are dropped. Scruffing is sometimes used to restrain ferrets. When a ferret is scruffed, they stop wiggling and often yawn. There have been reports of ferrets mauling infants, so it is important to never leave young children alone with a ferret for both the safety of the child and the animal.

Grooming

It is tempting to bathe ferrets frequently due to their natural odor, but this should be avoided. Bathing actually disrupts the natural oils in a ferret's skin and can make them stinkier. Ferrets are diggers, which means their nails tend to grow quickly. They tend to need nail trimming 2-3x per month for the front feet, and 1-2x for the back feet. A good trick for trimming ferret nails is to put a few squirts of Ferretone or fish oil on their bellies, which will distract them while their nails are trimmed. Ferret ears also naturally contain thick, dark wax, which shouldn't be confused with a mite infestation or ear infection. Regular ear cleaning is not recommended, as their ears are small and easily damaged. Consult with your veterinarian if you have concerns about the buildup of debris in your ferret's ears.

Like cats and dogs, ferrets are prone to dental problems. They build up tartar and can fracture teeth when chewing on toys or other objects. Ideally, a ferret's teeth should be brushed just like a cat or dog's, with a pet safe enzymatic toothpaste. It can be difficult to convince a ferret to sit still for this procedure. Yearly dental cleanings under anesthesia may be necessary.

Enrichment

One of the joys of owning a ferret is watching them play. A happy, playful ferret will make a chuckling sound called "dooking", and jump around to perform a behavior called the "weasel war dance". Ferrets require extensive mental stimulation when they are awake. They greatly enjoy tunnels, which can be purchased from a pet store or made from dryer tubes or pvc pipes. Dig boxes also allow ferrets to express natural behaviors and encourage exercise. A plastic bin filled with rice is safe if ingested and unlikely to irritate their respiratory system. Ferrets also enjoy ball pits, paper bags, tissue boxes, boxes, cat toys, small stuffed toys, blankets, and virtually anything new and exciting. Small toys that the ferret can pick up are recommended as they enjoy caching these items. Ensure that all toys are ferret safe and do not have parts that can be chewed off and ingested. Many ferrets can be desensitized to a harness and taken outside for walks. Ferrets need play time outside of their cage every single day, whether in a playpen or a ferret-proofed room. Many ferrets enjoy playing with their owners and will nip at them and jump around. Some ferrets can become over excited and bite hard enough to cause pain or even break skin, but most are able to learn how to play appropriately.

Ferrets are intelligent and often enjoy training. Appropriate treats for ferrets are meat based and small in quantity. Animal-based oils may also be a favorite treat for ferrets, but should be fed in moderation to avoid weight gain. Sugary treats are not healthy for

ferrets and can be harmful for ferrets with insulin producing tumors. The vast majority of commercial treats are inappropriate for ferrets and should be avoided.

If you are looking for a friend for your ferret consider checking out the Greater Chicago Ferret Association!

Zoonosis

Ferrets are very susceptible to influenza, which they can both get from us and give to us. Anyone with fever-like symptoms should not handle a ferret. Ferrets are also rabies vectors and required by law to be vaccinated annually. If on a raw diet, the risk of bacterial or parasitic contamination in feces is much higher.

Health

Unfortunately, ferrets are prone to a number of diseases. Adrenal disease, insulinomas, lymphoma, dental disease, bladder stones, foreign body ingestion, and stomach ulcers are all quite common in ferrets. They are also very sensitive to canine distemper and should be vaccinated annually along with rabies. Monthly heartworm prevention is also recommended for ferrets. New recommendations suggest that all desexed ferrets over the age of 1 should have a deslorelin implant under their skin every 12-18 months. These implants produce a type of hormone that mimics the natural feedback loop that is eliminated with desexing, and has been shown to prevent the development of adrenal disease. Ferrets also benefit from yearly dental cleanings under anesthesia, just like cats and dogs. It should be noted that certain color patterns of ferrets, particularly panda and blaze ferrets, have a higher incidence of deafness.

Signs of disease in ferrets include:

- Hair loss
- Swollen vulva
- Straining to urinate
- Diarrhea
- Bloody urine
- Decreased energy/appetite
- Seizures
- Drooling
- Sudden weakness/unresponsiveness
- Weight loss
- Vomiting

Always contact your veterinarian if you have any concerns about your ferret's health. Ferrets should be examined annually along with their vaccinations.

Sources and further reading:

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