

Keeping Ferrets Fact Sheet

It is not too far in the past that "ferreting" was a popular country occupation. In rabbit infested areas the use of nets and working ferrets gave the younger generation hours of harmless fun and often a tasty meal for the family afterwards. As habits and trends change the pet ferret population has diminished significantly. So of course has the rabbit population since Myxamatoxsis swept the UK.

The ferret is descended from the wild European polecat but many generations of breeding in a domestic environment has made the ferret into a very intelligent and rewarding pet that will provide hours and hours of fun. They come in a variety of colours from pure white (albino) to polecat. Like all animals they will develop trust in their owners if handled in a friendly and sympathetic way and are given clean and comfortable living quarters together with a suitable diet. They are not vicious animals but must be handled carefully and there are times (particularly during the breeding season) when ferrets like some privacy.

Regular handling from an early age establishes confidence and ferrets will learn very quickly. They can even be trained to walk on a lead and will live to about 10 years of age.

Like all intelligent furry animals they should not be spoilt and children should not be encouraged to let their ferrets roam unattended in the house. Ferrets are experts at hiding away in a dark corner or finding interesting areas to explore. Their sharp claws will quickly take them up the curtains and there is nothing more that a young ferret will enjoy than playing hide and seek. Being very small they can easily disappear for hours into a bed or down the back of a sofa.

What About The Odour?

Ferrets do have a distinctive odour and the male of the species particularly so! However, clean bedding at all times and attention to hygiene will greatly reduce any unpleasant smell. Keeping their fur clean and free of any fleas should be a daily routine.

Housing

Their cage should be stoutly built about 4 feet by 2 feet, a depth of 2 feet and have a private nesting/sleeping area out of view. It should have a roof that is waterproof and legs to keep it about 3 feet off the ground. It should be in a sheltered spot. A nesting area is particularly important for any breeding ferret as they are very sensitive to having their young disturbed at an early age. Ferrets will be healthier if kept outside with plenty of fresh air and with warm bedding will be happy during the winter months. Like any other animal they hate damp conditions.

Exercise

Ferrets are very active and need time spent on a daily basis. They cannot be left like a hamster or a guinea pig unattended for any period of time. They like to be on the move, are very inquisitive and of course their natural instinct is to hunt and "ferret about". If you are not prepared to spend time and take a great interest, ferrets are not for you! The time spent is amply rewarded as ferrets are affectionate, sociable, clever and fun. Lack of exercise and being confined to a small space for long periods of time is probably the cause of bad temper, nervousness and the reason why a ferret might not be averse to the odd painful bite. They are intelligent animals who do not like being neglected. With the right introduction they will happily interact with other family pets such as cats and dogs.

Diet

Ferrets are natural carnivores and there is nothing they love better than to get their face embedded in a piece of raw meat. Tinned specialist pet foods are fine and also cereal biscuits help to keep their teeth and gums healthy. Under no circumstances should ferrets be introduced to sweet foods as tooth decay will result. Plenty of fresh clean water should be available at all times. A simple diet and regular meal times with plenty of exercise forms the basis of good health.

Neutering

If single ferrets are kept and there is no wish to breed in the future then it is wise to have a ferret neutered. This will also prevent unwanted reproductive diseases associated with the female developing later on and it will also reduce the tendency of the male to produce odours.