



Whimkis Kit Guide

A BEGINERS GUIDE TO RAISING FERRETS

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*Whimsical Kismet
Ferretry*

Forenote

Thank you for picking up this e-book. I started writing this out as a few paragraphs to help new owners many years ago and it has grown over the years into this small book.

Please be aware that as the book originated as a guide for our new owners it is still geared towards them. As such there is sections where how we have raised our kits may have impacted the way our kits might respond. I have addressed the points where appropriate when I have noticed.

This book is not the be all end all of ferrets. There is more information on our website, but I also spend time each year writing new sections for the guide, updating the info in here and learning new things myself. Use this as your jumping off point in your own research and ferret journey.

As this book is heavily inspired by my own knowledge, experiences, and research, I do have my own opinions on many aspects of ferret care. Unless it is a welfare issue, I have tried to keep my opinion to myself and give both the pros and cons of the options available. I reserve the right to keep these opinions to myself as the options I choose are not the ones available to all, and no one should be made to feel bad or less than because they made the best choice they could for their pet. I would hope anyone reading these words takes that to heart and spreads a bit of kindness on to others they meet in and out of the ferret world.



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Feeding Your Ferret

Ferret kibble is available on the market and is a good choice for many but there are other options available to provide your pet with a healthier, more stimulating and more varied diet.

RAW or BARF diet

Ferrets are obligate carnivores they get all their energy from meat. As such the best food is meat but giving say chicken breast is not enough, they need a healthy mixed diet (like us just with different food groups) The easiest way to explain it is a heart is different from a kidney, it is made of different amounts of different amino acids, nutrients and minerals. Likewise, a mouse heart is ever so slightly different from a ferret, so a diet of mixed meat sources is better at giving balance to the diet

Commercial raw cat foods and whole prey diets are in the right ratios so are easier fed. Examples of whole prey are chicks, mice, rats, rabbits, quail, eggs and fish as well as many others but feeding solely one will likely cause a deficiency. It is best to speak to a snake food supplier so that you can find out what variety is available to you. **Please never feed wild rats or mice** they may be poisoned, and this poison will kill or seriously sicken your ferrets even if it failed to kill the rodent.

The other DIY method is Franken prey which can be used alongside the whole prey style or complete minces. This style can provide more variety the only rules are that the long-term diet must be made up of:

- ◆ 10-20% bone
- ◆ 5-10% liver
- ◆ 0-5% another organ meat
- ◆ 70-80% muscle meat
- ◆ At least 3 protein sources

The average mammal is 80% muscle meat, 10% organ of which half is liver and 10% bone. This is where the 80:10:10 ratio most raw diets state comes from; many small prey animals are not to this proportion however giving a slight leeway with bone. In my

experience a ferret will not overeat bone and if given too much will just leave the bone stashed somewhere. To make it balanced you must have 3 sources minimum. This may seem overly simple, but it is best to keep things simple. **Please Note: all meat fed to ferrets should be unseasoned**

What do we class in each category?

Organ: in raw feeding is defined as anything that secretes hormones: kidneys, liver, thyroid, brain etc. Liver is the only one defined as essential as it contains all the necessary vitamins found in other organs. Liver is very high in Vitamin A though so please do not feed more than 10% of liver overall.

Bone; bone is safe for ferrets if it is RAW. Cooked bone is brittle and sharp, it can lead to punctures or blockages in the bowel as all the spongy material is destroyed by cooking. The mineral component is dissolved in the gut by stomach acids and churning (like the bendy bone experiment), leaving the small fragments to go through the bowel safely. Bone is a necessary source of calcium and phosphorus in the correct ratios for a raw diet so is not able to be excluded, there are options for those who cannot chew, however. Raw bone powder can be used instead, or eggshells, though this is lower in phosphorous and sodium (making it ideal for a renal diet) so should not be long term for a healthy pet. Eggshell should be ½ a teaspoon to one pound of 8:1 meat/organ mix. To add eggshell into the diet as a bone substitute it should be air dried with the membrane and then finely ground into powder before measuring and adding. Any species of eggshell is fine, but it is recommended to, if possible, rotate your sources, i.e. Chicken, quail, duck. If using bone powder add 2 1/3 tablespoons per 3 pounds of mix.

Muscle meat: meat we eat normally but also some more unusual things like tripe, heart, tongue. Lung for example you may think of as organ, but this is a muscle. Beware of “pluck” organ grinds as these are made from lung and heart, both muscle meats.

Essential Meat Sources

Ferrets have certain nutritional requirements; they need taurine in their diet like cats. Taurine is found in all meat

but as it breaks down quickly in minces it is always wise to add high taurine meats to the diet. High taurine sources include heart and green tripe, muscles in constant use, or the brains of mice and rats from reptile shops. Some say 10% of meat (8% of total) should be taurine rich but a regular inclusion of high taurine and avoidance of low taurine (i.e. chicken breast) should be enough. It is also wise to add whole egg or egg yolk as this is an excellent source of iodine, necessary for hormone production. Make



sure you add fat to the diet too. It is necessary for all but ferrets need slightly more. Skin is ideal to add fat, as are ferret oils.

Supplements verses Synergy

So, by now you're probably thinking this is way too hard to get into, why not just feed chicken and supplement it. Well here's why: did you know you get more vitamin C from a tomato than a supplement? That's because the other components of a tomato naturally aid your absorption of the nutrients. The same is true for your ferret's diet, nutrients are absorbed much faster and more efficiently in whole prey and other balanced raw diets.

Another thing to keep in mind is the preparation. Food that is cooked, minced or otherwise altered begins to slowly break down the vitamins and proteins present so any prep must be done as fast and as little as necessary. Freezing does not speed these breakdowns in most cases, that's why frozen peas are often higher in nutrients than peas from the fresh section in a supermarket.

How much meat and organ to add

Most of your bone will probably come from meaty poultry or small mammal bones such as chicken wings, legs, necks, rabbit quarters etc. To help you balance your meals the table over the page contains some approximate meat to bone ratios in such meaty bones. Use this to figure out how much bone you have in a meaty bone [bone = weight x (%/100)], you will then need to feed approximately the same organ and can figure out the muscle to add [muscle to add = (bone x8) - (weight x (1 - (%/100)))]. It doesn't all have to be fed at once and can be fed over a few days.

A worked example using the equations previous:

We have a 150g leg quarter. Putting in weight and bone % in we get:

$$[\text{bone} = 150 \times (30/100) = 45]$$

it contains 45g of bone. We then find muscle to add

$$[\text{muscle to add} = (8 \times \text{bone}) - (\text{weight} \times (1 - (\% / 100)))]$$

$$= (8 \times 45) - (150 \times (1 - (30/100)))$$

$$= 360 - (150 \times 0.7)$$

$$= 360 - 105 = 255]$$

so 45g of liver/organ mix and 255g of heart, mince and chunks, or 25g of liver, 20g of kidney and 255g of heart, mince and chunks would make this balanced

Table of meaty-bone bone percentages

Meaty bone	Bone %
Chicken; leg quarter	30%
Split breast	20%
Thigh	15%
Drumstick	30%
Wing	45%
Neck	36%
Back	45%
head	75%
Whole (no head or feet)	25%
Duck; neck	50%
Whole	28%
Rabbit; whole in jacked	10%
dressed	28%
Game (dressed); Quail	10%
Guinea fowl	17%
Pigeon	23%
Duck	38%
Pheasant	14%
Cornish game	39%

Fresh Food

As already stated you should not feed wild rats or mice but wild rabbit, venison, goose, fish etc. are fine and add variety. You should freeze these for a few weeks to kill off any parasites, I'd also recommend going through a fish's guts before feeding it, not to remove them just to check the fish hasn't swallowed any fish hooks or plastic bags, and checking for shot in any shot game. Check birds, especially pigeon, for rowan berries (red in crop), discard gut if seen. If rabbit or squirrel has white spots in liver (coccidiosis) discard liver and waterfowl look for white "rice" in breast (Sarcocystis spp), in which case discard whole bird.

A note on game, myxomatosis and other viruses seen in rabbit are not transferable to ferrets, that said if its covered in mucus and pus do you really want to feed it to your beloved pet? Chronic wasting disease seen in deer is also not currently believed to be able to transfer to ferrets but is that worth the risk? We have a rule here that we will not feed that which we do not feel is suitable quality for humans and we'd suggest you take the same approach.

Raw feeding facts and myths

- Raw feeding does not make a pet vicious, in fact it can help prevent behavioral problems because it allows the pet to relax performing a natural behavior.
- You may have heard that raw egg causes biotin deficiency. This comes from their being a biotin binder in egg white However the egg yolk contains a much higher amount of biotin in it than the white can bind to, so egg yolks or whole eggs are a Source of biotin.
- Can fish cause thiamine deficiency? This is a similar problem to the egg issue. All meat contains thiamine, some fish contain the enzyme thiaminase which breaks down the amino acid. The most common of these are shellfish, crustaceans and higher trophic level fish (predators) all of which should be avoided due to increased chances of there being pollutants in the meat anyway. Feeding fish fresh does not give this enzyme a chance to work and storing apart from other meat sources prevents this being a problem if fed. Salmon, trout, mackerel, haddock, sprats, bass are all examples of safe fish to feed, if you are concerned just check that the fish is safe online. Please also be aware that fish should not make up a large part of a diet for ferrets, only up to 10%
- Feeding human grade raw meat will not give your pet worms. If you are feeding wild caught game or fish it is important to either freeze for 2-3 weeks to kill parasites OR worm/wormcount your ferrets regularly using the method that suits you best
- Raw and Kibble; because of a ferret's short fast digestive system they are one of the few animals that it is safe to feed both raw and kibble in the same meal, without risking stomach upsets

What to feed

Ultimately what you feed is up to you while your kit was with us we fed a mixture of kibbles to get them used the taste and texture in case it will be part of their diet at some point as well as a very mixed raw diet. You can feed good quality kibble only, kibble and raw meat or a raw only diet, because of their quick digestive rate all 3 are safe for ferrets.

Raw and kibble are not recommended for cats and dogs though because they have longer tracts. The kibble slows digestion and provides an ideal food for bacteria in longer tracts. If it doesn't suit your lifestyle or you can't commit to a well-balanced raw diet for whatever reason (cost, supply, pickiness) go for one of the other options. We and our pets are individuals, one size does not fit all.

How much to feed

Ferrets will not overeat. They are fantastic at self-regulating. Kibble can make them quite dumpy and fat, but this is not down to overeating, just the carbohydrates. In the winter they will get much fatter, this is normal and natural to protect them in the cold of winter, then in the spring they lose the extra weight. Try not to be alarmed when you see this change.

Given that, you may not be surprised to learn that they do not always eat the same. In the winter they tend to sleep a lot more and eat less and in the height of summer they also tend to eat less so you have to keep an eye on exactly how much they're eating so that you can be sure they're getting enough.

With kibble this is very easy, put a small amount in their bowl and top it up as needed. Just be aware they will dig in their kibble and it oxidizes so to avoid waste you cannot leave several days' worth of food in a bowl to pick at. Just like with water and meat you really should be changing it daily. With raw figuring out how much to put out is a bit harder. My adult ferrets eat on average 5% of their weight, or around 50-120g depending on size. 60g is our go to portion size and we work from there. Ideally you want to feed just enough in one feeding that it is all, or almost all gone by the next feeding. Minimizing waste and avoiding chances of attracting flies or bacteria growth. When you notice their stash is getting used up a few hours earlier just up the food slightly.

Water

Providing your ferrets with fresh clean water is a bit of a balancing act. We opt primarily for bottles because it prevents the water getting spilled or soiled but there is an argument for bowls being a more natural, easier way of providing water. Another option for house ferrets is a water fountain which filters the water and provides a source of running water which can encourage drinking. This is more important with kibble fed ferrets than raw fed as kibble fed ferrets can develop a case of chronic low-level dehydration.

The problems with fountains and bowls are they can often be tipped; things can be dumped in them and a lot of ferrets like to go swimming in them. In any case you should be changing water daily. You should also be cleaning the receptacles at least once a week. You can clean them more often, but the biofilm can have some benefit to their gut. Water soiled with urine or feces, the bowl should be cleaned with hot soapy water immediately.



Oils

Oils are very useful, they can be used for training, grooming, hairball prevention, as a treat or for supplements. They are also an excellent carrier for less palatable medicines. For ferrets I would always recommend a blend primarily (and mostly) of animal-based oils. Fish oils are ideal as they are excellent sources of omegas. Cod liver oils are safe for ferrets and a good source of omegas and Vitamin A. If you are using Cod liver oil, or if it is present in the blend you use, it is important to remember that Vitamin A can build up in fat and result in toxic levels. Ferrets can cope with higher vitamin A levels than cats or dogs, but it is still very important to treat cod liver oil as a supplement and not over feed it. One oil that is becoming more easily available is Krill oil. This oil is suitable for ferrets and highly sustainable (so environmentally friendly).

Personally, I would only use plant-based oils if they are added for a benefit they can give. One might add wheatgerm oil, or primrose oil for their properties for example. I would never add vegetable oil however because it has no benefit to the ferrets and is not species appropriate, this can result in upset stomachs. Vegetable or rapeseed oil is usually used as a diluter to make a cheaper oil. Coconut oil can be added to improve coats but if feeding a good fish oil, I find this unnecessary. I do however feed pressed coconut oil on its own occasionally as part of our parasite prevention. It can kill or weaken giardia, allowing the body to remove it. It is good as a prevention, if there is a parasite burden however, I would recommend using in conjunction with chemical wormers to remove the parasites as quickly as possible.

Essential oils should never be added into one of these mixes. Not only would this probably make the ferret refuse to take the oil but they can also be dangerous and their usage is too specific to be put in a generalized treat/supplement like ferret oil. Please contact a professional if considering using essential oils for pets. Some are toxic to ferrets and they are frequently too strong for them.

Storage of kibbles, raw and oils

Storage of kibbles should always be in airtight containers with as little air inside as possible. This is to prevent the oils oxidizing and going rancid inside the kibble. These rancid oils can be very dangerous for your pet. If you buy in bulk or will not be using a whole bag within the next couple of weeks, it is best to store it in a freezer to preserve the oils. You should also use all the kibble and clean the tub to remove oil residue before putting more into it.

The problem of rancid oils also affects the pet oils we use. To prevent them going off they should be stored in airtight containers, with as little air as possible, in a fridge. Plastic bottles used are not airtight, it can breathe so long-term storage should be in glass. You can even freeze the oil if necessary, just make sure after defrosting you give it a good shake and the plastics frozen in are free from any nasties.

We store our oil in the fridge, mostly in glass jars and bottles filled to the brim and sealed. Some of these we allow to freeze. We then have smaller plastic bottles that we transfer oil to for use. These bottles are thoroughly cleaned before refilling next time.

Raw should be stored in a freezer and treated to the same hygiene as your own raw meat. It should always be covered until fed to prevent contamination, defrosted naturally in a cool environment like a fridge to stop bacterial growth and dishes and utensils used for serving or preparing the food should be cleaned in hot, soapy water (or a dish washer) after use, and hands washed. Raw is only a risk of food poisoning if food hygiene is not followed.

Carnivores are less at risk of food poisoning than us so you can leave the food out for hours at a time. Exactly how long depends on the environment. A general rule is you can leave the food longer in colder weather. We usually feed 2x a day and feed enough that it will all or almost be gone by the next feeding. Left over food should be removed before it goes off. Your nose is the best indicator here, though if there is a lot of flies I would advise you remove left overs at the next feeding or you may end up with maggots in the cage.



Ferretry

Feeding locations

As well as cash spots we should consider feeding locations. This information is primarily for multi ferret households and is based on research done on domestic cats and dogs. In multi-pet households it was found that feeding in the same place every day resulted in stress and anxiety in the animals. This was rectified by feeding in different spots

every day or two. Anxiety can manifest as moody behavior, not using the litter tray or fighting, as well as poor health so it is worth avoiding if possible.

If you have a group of 3 or more, or during the breeding season, it may also be wise to add multiple watering stations. This allows ferrets to avoid each other or stop one from hogging a resource. An example: females sometimes wait near a bottle or by a bowl for others to come along, so she can drag them to her nest. Some ferrets don't mind this, others get stressed out. Having multiple places allows them to go somewhere else for food or a drink without getting treated like a naughty young kit.

Finally, whole prey feeding. I have always believed in tying down whole prey, particularly if it is meant for multiple ferrets. I don't really mind if someone runs off with a day-old chick. Tying down prey allows them to use their leg, neck and back muscles pulling at it until the piece of whatever they are eating comes off giving them some enrichment with their meal. It also stops one greedy guts from dragging the whole thing off and stopping anyone else getting some. With the prey spread out on the ground I have seen 10 ferrets all able to grab some pheasant at the same time, some just chewing on it, others trying to pull off chunks. Remembering that caching is a natural behavior I always come along later after everyone has calmed down and release it so that it can be put "away". I would never tie prey up off the ground. Although I might play with them a bit pulling a chunk or prey upwards, side to side etc. this is for a restricted time and I "give" a bit so that they are winning, something a tether cannot do without pulling back just as hard. Prolonged downwards pulling can result in injuries to the muscles and ligaments of the back and neck and can cause problems of ferrets being pushed out of a smaller feeding radius or just not being able to reach the food if the tether is too high. I can understand people tying up to reduce chances of bedding or litter sticking to the food however simply putting a smooth, washable surface in the feeding area, away from bedding and litter is just as effective and does not have the problems I have described.

Cash Spots

Ferrets instinctively hide food- if you don't like it tough. Many owners think it's a good idea to give the ferret a place to store this food. I know some people provide a whole "room" in the cage made from a storage tub with a hole in the side, but we find our ferrets prefer a "cubby" which can be anything that's sturdy enough and easily cleaned and sterilized Personally we use small plastic plant pots. We'd recommend that you provide a cash spot for each ferret and be sure to check it daily for old food

Feeding timing

Ferrets always need access to fresh water irrespective of their diet. As they have quite a fast metabolism they need to eat regularly throughout the day, or they can become very ill. Kibble feeders can leave the kibble out all day to give them a steady supply of food, but Raw feeders must be more thoughtful.

Feeding raw twice a day is frequent enough for most ferrets, bearing in mind cash spots. Ill ferrets or those who are elderly may need fed up to every 3 hours. Ferrets with insulinoma are among those that need fed more frequently. In the storage section we discuss how much to feed but our feeding timings change with the seasons. In winter we feed mostly whole fresh game which we give them in the morning and may feed them minces in the evening if it is all gone.

As the weather heats up, we feed smaller whole prey to ensure it is all eaten before the heat and flies get to it. We also start giving them whole prey in the evenings so that it will be eaten in the cool, fly free night. You might find that they become more active at night in the summer anyway as the heat in the day makes them tired and lazy.

Feeding Around Operations

As ferrets can be sick, they need empty stomachs before going under anesthetic fortunately their digestion rate is incredibly fast, so they do not need food withheld for as long as dogs or cats. It is worth calling your vet and finding out when they are scheduled for surgery so you can check if they have time for breakfast. They need approximately 4 hours of no food before anesthesia. What we do is find out the ferret's schedule, wake up early for breakfast and remove it 4 hours before hand. We then make a point of confirming the last feeding time with our vet at booking in, so they know not to take him in sooner than is safe. Our vets are also very good for making sure to give us a call post op when they are providing our ferrets with water and a meal to raise their blood sugar, a vital meal for ferrets post fasting. Be aware that you might need to provide a meal for post-surgery. Wet cat food is often better because some vets do not like raw and kibble mixed with anesthetic in the blood can result in dehydration.



Ferretary

Nipping, Biting and Training

What is a bite and what is mouthing?

Ferrets play very rough together, often when they play with you, they try to play the same way as they would with another ferret, this is mouthing. It is important to realize when a ferret is mouthing it is not intending to hurt you, but it does need to stop, or you are running the risk of the ferret biting during play when it gets over excited. Jill's may also mouth when in a phantom or nursing, it is just their mothering instincts kicking in making them take you to bed or grooming you. This should be addressed with nip training.

Biting is when a ferret breaks the skin and yes it hurts and bleeds a lot. Often when biting a ferret will lock on. The claims that the ferrets jaw must be broken in this case are ridiculous and cruel. The best method is to hold the scruff and either wait for it to release and quickly remove the offending mouth or slowly prize their teeth open. If that fails lowering your hand into a basin of water giving plenty time for the ferret to let, go before submerging works. There are several reasons a ferret could bite and to truly address biting you must understand why.

Scared ferrets often bite. You must not reprimand a scared ferret, you must show them love and compassion and make them feel safe. Kits in a new home are most likely to bite for this reason. They also may do this if a new person handles them that they are afraid of.

Ferrets also push their boundaries in a new home and sometimes with new people, one of ours, Reepicheep, is always pushing boundaries and he sometimes needs reminded that we do not allow mouthing. This also needs to be addressed with nip training.

There are 2 more reasons for biting, and both must be addressed by you.

The first is boredom. Ok you're just reminding me to give them toys I hear you say, no. I have seen ferrets die from boredom, therefore you must provide a run, toys and yes, a friend for your ferret. Something as simple as changing which toys are out or moving the hammocks around once a month can avoid the whole situation.

The second is health: sick, in pain or mentally unstable ferrets bite. if your ferret suddenly starts biting do 2 things, call the vet and get it checked over and scruff the ferret and give him a full health check. Mentally unstable ferrets could be due to a hormone imbalance, poor food or loneliness. We had a rescue in years ago, who had literally gone around the bend and would bite just to have some contact with another soul and then flee in fear of how you would react. Ferrets must have company.

Nip Training Methods

- ✓ think positive, encourage play without nipping
- ✓ stay in control, think headmaster
- ✓ distract, if you think he's going to nip say uh-uh and give him a toy to bite then praise him for "killing" the toy
- ✓ make sure he's got a friend for rough play, he's got to do it but it doesn't have to be with you
- ✓ feed raw meat, chewing it is pleasant for them and gets the biting out their system before play
- ✓ don't pull away, or the hunt drive kicks in
- ✓ don't squeal, again the hunt drive kicks in and they try to make you make the funny noise again
- ✓ do not let them do anything that makes you nervous, say uh-uh or No depending on how nervous they are making you. We often give a buzzy chuckle as a kind of reminder we don't like that behaviour
- ✓ give them naps, a lot of kits nip when overtired so stick to 30 mins a time

We use 3 strikes for training:

- I. say uh-uh, a reminder the behavior isn't tolerable
- II. say No! tell them they're going to far
- III. punishment



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Punishment is a broad term normally a sharp eeck! And going in the huff is enough to say "you really hurt me" and then they apologize. Likewise hissing and going in the huff can be enough. Sometime a NO! And time out is necessary while you play with the others. If the ferret is being nasty with his bite it may be necessary to scruff him when you say NO! before time out. Please note this is to get their attention if the ferrets scared or unsure DO NOT use this method. Scuffing if done right will not hurt a ferret but makes them go limp (extremely helpful at the vets) but it is a bit of a power play. Mums scruff kits, hobs scruff jills during mating, it can make a scared ferret feel very vulnerable, but it is still an important tool to keep in your kit to control dangerous

situations. Even tiny kits can cause serious damage biting and its essential that they learn it is not appropriate.

Time outs are not a punishment like they are to a child, they are a chance for the ferret to calm down, and it removes them from playing, play is a reward by itself. You put the ferret back in the cage or carrier until they are calm then let them re-join the fun. I often hear people say time outs don't work but they tend to be miss using them. A time out is until the ferret is calm, not a set time etc. it gives them space to settle down, you time to regain composure if it was a bad one and reinforces that bad behavior results in imprisonment. Most kit nipping and biting during play is due to over excitement so this tool can be especially useful in such cases. If you are noticing that they reach a point they become unruly it might be best to put them away for a nap and take them out again in a few hours.

Every ferret and owner are different, experiment and see what works for you but here's the hard part, you must give them the chance to behave. When you're confident that they know what's right and what's wrong give them a chance to bite, don't push it, never push it, but let them prove they can behave.

Litter training

Ferrets naturally want to go to the toilet in one place, usually a corner, so they are relatively easy to train. Also, unlike cats they are More likely to use the tray if it is lightly used. A very dirty or smelly tray puts them off, however. They learn where the latrine is by habit and scent so consistency is key, and I would suggest that until you are 100% on top of litter training you do not use any strong masking or deodorizing cleaners in it. Poop scooping and a wipe out with pet safe disinfectant once a week is enough in general to keep things clean and fresh.

Ferrets who need a toilet tend to hover in corners, which is the favorite place for most to poo, scuttle backwards into them and sniff at places that have been soiled before.

The tray used can also influence how easily litter training goes. Although they prefer to poo in corners, corner trays are often too short for larger ferrets. Ferrets also enjoy rearranging their living quarters so trays must be very secure, or they will be moved and tipped. Finally, the tray must be easily accessed, a tray that is hard to get to or get into is often ignored. Although it makes no difference to litter training it is also useful to try and get a tray with a reasonably high back because ferrets seem to have competitions on who can poo the highest and a high back helps keep everything inside the tray.

When you collect your baby/babies we give you some food, toys, paperwork and some cat litter if you plan to litter train. The easiest way to litter train is to either place the tray where you want it and put in some leavings, thoroughly cleaning up any accidents so that the smell is gone, and place them in it when they wake up and whenever they

look like they need the toilet until they preform or to wait and see where they want to go then put the tray there. We use Cats Best Original now but did use mix of wood based cat litter and wood shavings (heavy on the litter, the shavings were for comfort on their feet) you can change it by mixing it in a bit at a time until only the new litter is in the tray, please don't do this until they are settled and using the tray or you could put them off it. Also, please avoid clay based clumping litter or silicon based litter (there's always the risk someone will think it's kibble and give themselves a blockage) and anything gravelly unless its mixed with something soft (how would you like walking on gravel barefoot to get to the toilet). Chick crumb for feeding hatchlings is a good edible substitute for clumping litter, but cats best clumps into sticky clumps, is safe if ingested and is flushable which are some of the reasons we switched to that.



Grooming

Skin and coat: As a rule, ferrets do not need any coat care. Their front teeth are like tiny combs, so they can groom themselves much better than we can, and bathing doesn't really remove smell, just strips the oils and causes them to produce more oil and more smell. Every 3-6 months they do molt, and their coats can get thinner or patchy for a period but if they lose fur anywhere on their bodies or their skin looks irritated you should seek vet advice.

Ferrets do scratch as part of grooming, but an overly itchy ferret could have parasites which you can treat with everything from tablets to bathing, but they could simply have a bit of an allergy to the soap you use on their bedding, or even a food allergy. There really are too many possibilities to go into, fur loss can even be signs of real health problems. If you cannot think of an obvious reason, or if the problem does not clear up after addressing the most obvious possibility's, you need to get a diagnosis. How you treat for the diagnosis is up to you, however.

I would recommend that you always have a bottle of cat shampoo in the cabinet just in case they get covered in something. You never know when someone will get into mischief.

Wormer: I was not sure where to put this, but grooming seems as good a place as any since grooming is more routine. Ferrets can get worms and other parasites. You can treat routinely, or check with a worm count and treat if needed. You can also get a variety of natural and chemical wormers. We treat precautionary with natural wormers and periodically do random worm counts to check it's working, treat chemically if needed. This works best for us and reduces chances of an overdose or reaction.

Ears: Like their coat, most of the time you do not need to address ears because they clean each other. Sometimes they over groom their ears which can lead to excess wax, or they can get them scratched or dirty by playing, so it is good to have an idea of how to clean them. We have thornit powder that we use a makeup brush to put round their external ears if they're looking a little dirty or irritated, if they need a clean though we have a bottle of ear cleaner to just wipe out the ear with, you can get these from most pet shops or even use some edible oil. If they're pawing at them, really dirty or smell however they may have an infection and need a vet visit.

(right is nail trimming position)

Nails: Ferrets nails are more akin to dogs than cats, so they need their nails trimmed every 2-4 weeks on average. Some ferrets' nails grow faster and some wear them down easier, so if you are not doing them as often as someone else don't worry. The easiest way to do this is to put some ferret oil on their stomach about their navel then pop them on their back and point it out. You can then sit them on a table in-front of you or your lap and trim their nails as they lap it off.



You can use a pair of nail clippers or some dog nail clippers to trim them. I use scissors style dog nail clippers for my largest ferrets and normal nail clippers on the rest. Ferrets have white nails, so you can see the wick as a thin red line near the base of the nail. So long as you don't cut this you can trim them as short as you like but if you trim very close you might hurt them so trim as close as you feel comfortable with. Myself I leave their front nails slightly longer because they love to climb so much and that couple of millimeters of nail helps them climb.

Teeth: There's not much you can do for their teeth, keep an eye out for broken teeth or irritated gums. Broken teeth may need removed if the root is exposed, though often the tips of canines become mildly chipped and cause no pain or risk. By feeding whole prey such as chicks or bones such as chicken wings, you can help keep teeth clean. Kelp powder (i.e. plaque off) can also help dissolve plaque, though this product has been known to overdose iodine if used in the dose suggested by plaque off, there are also oral gels you can purchase that coat the teeth, protecting from build-up, we have been able to buy these at the vets though good pet shops may also stock them. Kibble and wet food contain a lot of carbs which can cause damage to teeth long term, so if you notice your ferret has food sticking to their teeth try and get it off and consider using one of the methods I have mentioned above or even your nail if you feel confident enough. Brushing such a small animals' teeth is almost impossible, you can try a tiny tooth brush or a finger wrapped in muslin with some doggy tooth paste but particularly with small ferrets it's very hard to see what you're doing and get to where it's needed, so it is important to address any tooth problems before they need help to be cleaned.



Options on Desexing

Ferrets, both males and females, come into season in the spring. For females this is the start of a hormone cycle that can happen repeatedly until winter, or all year round if kept in artificial conditions. This cycle involves coming into season, coming out, a pregnancy hormone cycle, a break from hormone changes acting as a reset and then back into season. How long that break is dictates how many seasons she has in a year. For males their testis drop and remain dropped until after the breeding season when they shrink and move back into the body. Aside for the ferrets being fertile at these times it is vital to be aware of the health risks and options of hormonal ferrets so that you can safely manage their seasons.

DO NOT GET A FERRETS SENT GLANDS REMOVED and if you're in the UK report the vet. This is not necessary and is classed as mutilation (same as ear clipping and docking for cosmetic reasons only) in the UK it's illegal.

In season males smell bad, some worse than others. Their undercoats turn from cream to orange with oils that are the source of this smell. The smell is more of a musk than the smells you might be thinking of when thinking of a ferret smell and is not always unpleasant if kept to a reasonable level. The important things to keep in mind are not to bath the ferret or you will encourage more oil production, and to clean the bedding regularly to remove the oils from the cage. They can also become territorial with other ferrets, especially males. Again, some males are worse than others, though in my experience there seems to be a genetic and personality element, as well as husbandry. To me an intact male is not a problem if he is given enough space, mental stimulation and well fed. Introducing new ferrets to adult intact males during the breeding season does not tend to go well, however. Neutering or implanting both prevent the males from coming into season so you do not have to worry about any of these problems. There is more info on these further on in the *neutering and bringing a jill out* section.

The female ferret will come into season naturally, usually only once a year, but she can come in several times, usually starting her first spring (around 9 months) but rarely there will be a jill come in from as young as 3 months. She will not come out of season naturally. The signs will be a swelling vulva and a change in smell. Unlike males a female ferret smell in season is very sharp and unpleasant to everyone. It's rather like cat pee. Fortunately, it only lasts as long as she is in season and for health reasons you will not want to leave her in season too long. The high estrogen levels weaken the immune system and stop the bone building cells from working (but the breaking down ones don't stop) which weakens the bones and breaks down the marrow where blood is

made so there's less blood available to the body. Basically, they get what's called Aplastic Anemia which can kill them or secondary infections from being run down can kill them. Occasionally you will hear of an owner whose ferret "came out herself", let me be clear here, the reason these ferrets came out is because their bodies are so damaged they are shutting down unnecessary processes, much like a woman whose periods stop when she is severely underweight or ill. These ferrets might survive once, they might survive twice, but they do not survive past their 3rd year left. How do you stop it? She must be brought out of season, or not come in in the first place, the methods of season management are linked to the methods of neutering and neutering is of course one way to manage them.

Jills and phantom pregnancies

A phantom pregnancy in a jill is not dangerous to her health but they are an adjustment for her owner. Many people find their jills become calmer and cuddlier during her phantom, others find she becomes territorial and irritable. Jills who are hard to manage in a phantom should not have a litter because this nature can be passed on to both sexes of kits. These negative personality changes can be reduced by making sure she can eat, drink and sleep away from her cage mates. It is important that she feels safe to have the kits her hormones are telling her she will have.



Another side effect is mothering behavior. Mothering behavior mostly expresses itself by collecting toys, stashing food more and adopting cage mates. My Vasectomized hobs absolutely love this because they get to chill out in their bed and the girls bring them food. The only problem is they'll also stop him getting to water or going to the toilet if they can. You can see why this possessive mothering can upset other phantoming jills and they can also get really stressed out if the boy doesn't cooperate. The jills can be quite insistent, one year my hoblet needed time in a hospital cage alone for a few months when the girls decided to drag him repeatedly by the same ear resulting in a tear behind the ear. He was fine with a bit of healing time, but it goes to show how extreme jills can be in their efforts to be mum.

Like with males the important thing is to make sure everyone has space to get away from each other, places to sleep apart and food and water points where they can avoid each other if they're getting on each other's nerves

Neutering and bringing a jill out

1. mating; does sometimes calm a hob (boy) BUT sometimes winds a hob up. It is not really a reliable option for managing an intact male but I felt this line of thought should be addressed. A jill (female) will come out when mated but will have a litter
2. the jill jab; a hormone injection. Works short term to take a jill out without kits but some do have a reaction to it. Not available for males. This does result in a phantom pregnancy
3. Hoblet; a hoblet (vasectomized hob) still has a sex drive and testis but the sperm tubes have been cut and/or tied so he cannot impregnate a jill, it's a natural method of taking a jill out without a litter and allows a male to live with jills full time. This does result in phantom pregnancies and the males still behave and smell as though intact. I have even known some to be worse as they are behaving as though to defend the territory of their mates and "off spring", as in their mind the jills are expecting.
4. neutering; removes the hormones entirely by removing the testis or ovaries. This permanently stops the seasons and removes risks of pyometra, and some cancers but leaves the ferret higher risk of other cancers and vulnerable to Adrenal Disease (explained later) because of this many vets are refusing to neuter. A hob would then be called a Gibb and a jill a Sprite. The ferret must be under anesthetic which is a risk and should be a minimum of 6 months old to go through the operation.

I would advise females to be neutered in the winter if possible, but males wait until they're in season to make the operation easier for either sex

There is also new evidence emerging that neutering may increase risks of a lot of other health issues. The video of Dr Karen Becker on the matter is very worth watching for a start to your research on this:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=enPCZAIWFKY>

5. the deslorelin implant; blocks the hormone pathways that cause seasons, but it is temporary and only lasts a couple of years. It does not lead to adrenal but is sometimes used to treat it. The down side is that the implant can be very expensive, also depending on the vets' preference the ferret may be under anesthetic to get it (some do some don't, some even put them under to microchip) This option is suitable for both males and females and does not cause a phantom pregnancy. You must be alert for signs of it wearing off, the timing of which depends on size given, the ferrets size, season cycles, hereditary aspects

and even husbandry. If implants start wearing off unusually quickly it may be a sign of hidden illness.

In an attempt to balance risks of adrenal, season management and costs a common choice is to implant during their first year and once this runs out (generally in a year or 3 depending on the size used) to neuter. It is worth contacting your vet if you are interested in following this route as not all vets offer the implant or are willing to neuter a ferret due to them being educated on the risks of adrenal.

The other common choice for groups is vasectomized hob and jills but this should be weighed up with phantom pregnancies and that not every vasectomised male will be ok with another vasectomized male in beside them. It is very personality dependent. You may need to opt for implanting or neutering second males in such a group.

Adrenal disease

The systems that the testis and ovaries are involved in are very complex and not entirely understood, they developed over millions of years and they're involved with lots of different signaling pathways in the body (that's why when humans are sterilized they have so many tests afterwards) so when you think of it like that is it any wonder that it can lead to long term problems?

Adrenal is fatal. It's caused by adrenal glands trying to overproduce to make up for the hormones not produced by the ovaries or testis. Tumors then grow on the adrenal glands causing excess hormone production. It has various symptoms generally including swollen prostate/vulva, hair loss, lethargy...

It has been linked to neutering, particularly early neutering. Most ferrets with adrenal studied are in America where ferret mill kits are neutered at very young ages, so this may have led to suggestive evidence of early neutering being a cause instead of neutering in general, however in my experience was of a ferret neutered at 18-24 months. Another link has been seen to artificial lighting extending the light period, over stimulating the glands as their brains try to push them into season. Like most things there is also probably a genetic predisposition in some ferrets, much like some people can drink and smoke heavily for 80 years without getting ill and some never do and still have health complications. It's really a combination of things.

Adrenal is treated by the implant preventing the feedback loop that results by the tumors. This treatment treats the symptoms and prevents the disease progressing. Some vets also give the option to treat by surgery to remove the tumors. This is not always successful or possible, but it is worth discussing with the vet when considering the options for a ferret.

Caring for Your Ferret

Ferrets can and do die from boredom and loneliness. I mentioned this in the section on biting. It is vital that a ferret is mentally stimulated. This section is to help you have ideas on how to provide enrichment and things to bear in mind when devising games.

Ferret proofing and runs

I write this section so you can learn from the experiences of ourselves and others. Ferrets are master escape-artists and can be destructive in their effort to escape. It is not through malice on their part, it is just their intelligence and curious nature pushing them to discover. You should consider that a ferret can climb, dig and fit through tiny holes. If you have a concern then you should address it, don't assume they won't manage to slip out. Sometimes they manage to stick their heads through a hole and get stuck making small holes particularly dangerous. You must always have a part of your mind focused on safety. With a bit of practice, you can have an idea of where your ferret is at all times. It sounds mad but even if I don't know who is missing, I can tell that there is someone missing by watching my ferrets playing or waiting for their food.



Ferrets do not tend to chew aside from rubber, so you do not need to worry about wires in the same way you do with rabbits, but they do pull on wires and can knock over lamps, hot cups, candles etc if they get to them. They're also fast and you need to be aware of where they are and your feet or check your seat before sitting. I cannot emphasize enough how helpful training your ferret to ignore feet and socks is. If you don't wear shoes you are more likely to be able to feel them and avoid an accident. They are also thieves so keep an eye to prevent them getting into any dangerous food, drinks or items like batteries, cleaning products etc.

In the house your ferret will probably reach the window, so you have to either keep windows closed or consider fitting screens like those used to keep cats in. Rooms with pipes fitted are weak points, they often can squeeze into the gaps between the pipe and the floor or wall. They are also more than capable of scratching and digging into the plasterboard around these holes pulling the plaster apart and making the hole larger.

Washing machines, furniture with moving parts and furniture in general are also risky. They love to look for holes around furniture leading to them slipping into recliners, investigating washing machines and hiding under couches, sometimes even opening little holes to sleep inside. Every year you hear of a few ferrets who have managed to get hurt in a recliner or washing machine so please check you know where they are before using any similar device.

They enjoy having a hidden den and a few people, including ourselves have either an empty drawer that they sleep in or a wardrobe, some ferrets even sleep in bed with their owner but as you cannot keep an eye on them while you sleep I would recommend you put them in their enclosure for safety.

If you can move something expect your ferret to be able to. This includes cupboard doors, drawers, and cleaning trays or lift roofs on runs and hutches. I would always recommend adding different types of catches to hutches or runs and hasps. Even weak hasps have the advantage of discouraging people from stealing or letting out your ferrets too.

Like with plaster board a ferret can be destructive to the edging of thin wood in their cage resulting in them escaping. They can also dig out in soft surface runs so the bottoms should be secured on slabs, concrete or have mesh buried under the ground. Runs and hutches should be built with fine mesh, not chicken wire. Chicken wire can be pulled apart and is easier pulled off from the frame. Likewise, inside cages the bar spacing should be checked. If the bar spacing is fine but the bars the other way are too far apart ingenious ferrets can still squeeze through so I make a point of checking reviews that the cage can keep in rats before purchasing.

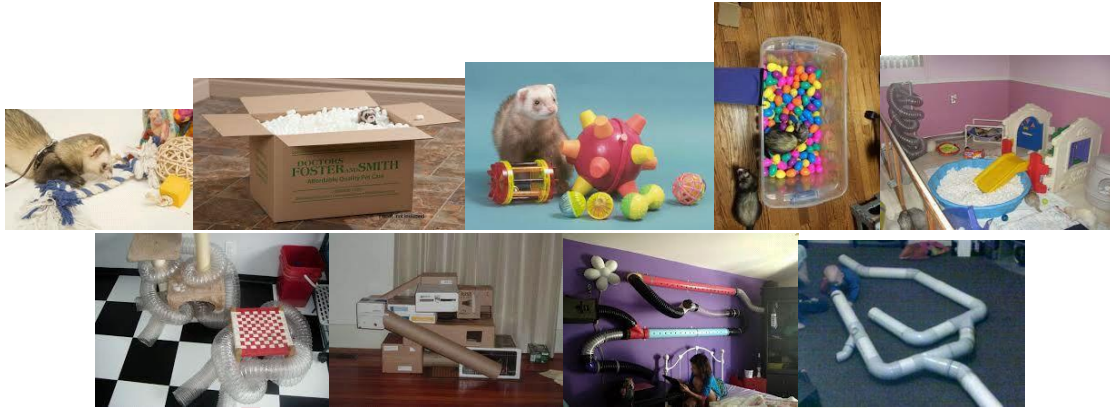
Roofs should always be secure too. A slippery surface for 6+ inches to the top of a run can usually keep them in but it does not prevent cats, dogs or birds of prey from getting in nor does it prevent the clever ferret from parkouring their way out. I'm not joking, they are very capable of planning an escape and doing it just for fun. I've even watched them trick the cats and dogs into opening doors for them. If you are using an open topped run, no matter how secure only use it when you can observe them.

For ferret runs I prefer an aviary, though a chicken coop or rabbit run can be just as good. You can burry tunnels, plant trees or hedges in there and use outdoors ornaments, visual cat scares, windmills, windchimes, hanging baskets and things like shallow pools or sprinklers, or if it's out of the weather you can put in anything that you would consider using inside such as hammocks, cat trees, soft toys etc.

Choices of plants in the run can be very open since ferrets do not chew as a rule however it is best to avoid spiny, thorny or sharp plants, succulents and bulbs, as well as anything poisonous to dogs and cats. It is vital that you prevent your ferret from having access to lilies and their pollen as they are highly poisonous.

Toys

Hopefully this will give you some ideas of your own you're only limited by your imagination



- cat toys
- pipes and tubes
- Stuffed toys
- Long feathers
- cat teasers
- bubble machines
- ball pits
- Tree stumps to climb or scratch the dirt from the root ball
- sheets, towels and blankets to dig in
- small toys to stash, a pair of used socks is good for interesting smell
- drag a box or sheet around so they can catch a lift
- hides and places to stash toys
- Attach a ball or a piece of material to some string
- Cardboard boxes (*preferably with holes cut out*)
- A maze made up of cardboard boxes or tubes
- black mini kongs (*remove damaged ones to prevent ingestion*)
- sprinklers and shallow paddling pool
- dog rope toys
- dig boxes or digging pits
- cat scratchers
- wind chimes
- Toddler safe slides etc
- hammocks
- tennis balls

it is always worth asking others, googling or looking on ferret websites for toy and game ideas

Brain teasers

As well as having fun with your ferrets' toys and games are important for providing your pet with mental stimulation. This is more important the smarter your ferret is and the more likely they will get bored and therefore nippy or destructive. Dog and cat brain teaser toys are a good way to give them mental stimulation and keep them occupied for short periods of time, though you do need to find a special high value treat to put in.

Harness training

Taking your ferret out for a walk may sound mad but it's a good way to entertain them. They get to smell new smells, see new sights, and frighten you in new and exciting ways.



Training your ferret to use a harness is very simple, firstly you need to find a harness that fits correctly, please avoid collars purely because if they slip out that's it, they're gone, whereas a harness gives you time to secure them if they manage to get a leg out etc, collars can also hurt the neck if they pull, and they do pull. Since all ferrets are so different it can be hard to find a good fitting harness so many people choose to get one made by a professional, if you decide to buy one though its best to try it on before you buy it. We make our own figure 8s which can adjust to any size.

Secondly you need to get your ferret used to the feel of it. This is not hard, particularly with young ferrets. Most ferrets try and pull the harness off at first but with a bit of distraction forget about it quickly. It is best to do this in the house without a leash on. Our kits have had harnesses on before, but new styles may feel different.

Finally put the leash on and go out for a walk. I should point out that walking a ferret isn't like walking a dog, it's more like being walked. The ferret can be taught to come with you, but they get much more fun out of digging in mud, getting tangled in long grass and bushes, and generally getting up to mischief. It's better to pick a destination, go there and let your ferret play than try to take your ferret for a walk there.

For safety reasons, it is not a good idea to leave your ferrets harness on in the cage or when you're not around. They can cause deaths by freak accidents getting caught on things and it is completely preventable by taking the harness off when not needed.

Bedding

We use a variety of bedding options all for different reasons. We like to use teabag bedding and soft straw or hay to let the ferrets build nests, usually with a nesting box. Different sizes and styles of nesting boxes are available, we like to put in a few so that individuals can have their own space if they want it, particularly in the summer when everyone is feeling hormonal.

The other options are soft bedding such as vet bedding and small animal beds such as round beds, and hammocks and snuggle sacks. Ferrets Love hammocks and they come in a variety of styles, colors and materials and are also fun. For this reason, they are the number one choice for most ferret owners.

Cage Rattling

Cage rattling is boredom behavior. The general reason can be summed up in one sentence; they want something. Some ferrets only do it at feeding time, they want their food. Some do it because they want your attention. By far the most common reason is under stimulation or under exercised.



Cage rattling can be a genuine problem. It's annoying but can also lead to damage to the cage or even broken teeth and in some cases cage aggression. In any case it is clear you should take note of it and work to address the problem.

With ferrets who are doing it to get attention or food I would secure the door more firmly so that it doesn't make that noise and just not give in until they calm down. Eventually the ferret learns that if he scratches, he doesn't get (negative

reinforcement) and if he behaves he does get (positive reinforcement), the balance of force free positive and negative really helps them learn faster. It would also be wise to increase the attention that an attention rattler gets overall so that they do not develop into an under stimulated rattler.

I try to breed ferrets of moderate energy, but there is always the odd ferret born who is high energy in a litter. Normally it is obvious before rehoming and we will look for a home that is experienced or where they will be getting an awful lot of attention. Sometimes they become a bit hyperactive at adolescence if that's the case you must work through it. Temporarily up the attention, stimulation and time out of the cage.

I would recommend that an indoors ferret have a cage large enough to run about and play in, have a friend to play games with and get at least a couple of hours of free play a day. Not only does this keep bodies healthy but also minds.

All that said I do not think a ferret should rule the roost. Make sure that they are fed and exercised long before bedtime, and when bedtime comes, I would consider a cage cover for a ferret being trained not to cage rattle. This stops them being able to see you, so they cannot get your attention. They can pull the cover through the bars of a cage though, so I would not spend much money on the cover until you have nipped the scratching in the bud.

I have said before to someone wanting to keep her kits in her bedroom ferrets are much noisier than rats. It wasn't until she had had them a few months that she admitted to me that she really should have listened. Her ferrets had hit puberty, were being kept away from the family during the day and at night she came into her room and they thought it was playtime. I cannot stress enough that if your ferrets are going to be indoors pets, they **MUST** get attention during the day and not in the late evening or they will not settle.

Ferrets are not nocturnal, but many do prefer to be active when it's dark. Many a



night I have woke up for the toilet and heard dooking and windchimes from the runs with my ferrets making the most of the night. It is up to you to try and train them to keep the hours you deem appropriate and I certainly do not recommend keeping them in your bedroom unless there is no other option.

Keeping things interesting

Anything gets boring if you do it too often, likewise if you do not change things up inside the cage the ferret will get bored and this can affect their wellbeing. Hammocks and bed should be changed at least once a week for cleaning, it is a clever idea to move these into various positions or replace with a different style now and then to keep things interesting. Changing the type and position of the toys and tunnels every now and then also prevents boredom, even moving where shelves are is good.

One thing I would not recommend you move is the litter tray.

Blind ferrets

For ferrets who are blind I would not move the cage about. Blind animals often rely on habit to get around so moving things could make them confused or frightened. Instead I would suggest adding novel items: toys of interesting textures or that make noises, items with interesting scents on them, maybe a different textured bed instead of putting it in a new place? And lots of attention of course.

Plants can also be very stimulating, particularly herbs. But be prepared for all the plants to be dug up or tipped over

Deaf ferrets

Unless you check for deafness you are unlikely to know if your ferret is deaf. They do tend to ignore you if they want to and it can be hard to tell if they can't hear or are just ignorant. Clicker training is quite good for checking since they immediately look for the treat after hearing the click. Bilaterally deaf ferrets can act a bit oddly. Spinning around at a noise on the deaf side or holding their head tilted quite often. They can be born like this, but they can also become deaf if they get a bad ear mite case or ear infection if they are unlucky. They can also become hard of hearing with age, but it is not common. A born deaf ferret should never be bred because it is likely genetic. If they become deaf though accident or illness, I would also not recommend breeding, in the case of a jill this is an incredibly bad idea. If jills cannot hear they can kill the babies or lose them very easily. They can't hear when they're lost or cold and can hurt them by accident.

In way of enrichment you will not need to treat a deaf ferret differently. Since they cannot hear you calling however it is particularly important to make sure you socialize them, so they do not become frightened. They also will not come when you call so a bell on their harness during play time can be very helpful for preventing them becoming lost.

Physically disabled

You might be surprised how common physical disability is. They are now adding disabled classes to ferret shows because of how common it is. Many ferrets, like cats and dogs, become arthritic as they age, but there's also examples of ferrets who have developmental issues like swimmers, injuries like being stepped on can result in pelvic problems or broken bones and sometimes mums can go a bit overboard at birth resulting in an amputation. One of my ferrets has an amputation on the tip of his tail and a toe missing thanks to this.

As a rule, you will not need to do anything for these ferrets. They are surprisingly able. They adapt. Our first boy Dylan was a rescue who was physically disabled. Due to a spinal and pelvic injury he had a lot of arthritis and stiffness moving. You might imagine this held him back but he was very capable, a well-used vasectomized hob, and rarely needed any help. Giving him more room over a single level, gentle climbing and digging, friends and a warm bed he was fine. Better than that, he became healthier over his time with us due to the ability to get good exercise in his own time. The only things we did to help him were always make sure there was a bed, water and food in a place he could easily access if he tired himself out and couldn't climb up to the higher sections of the enclosures (where they usually slept and ate).

The only thing I would recommend is taking the time and thinking outside the box at how they could hurt themselves. Dylan for example was quite clumsy at his back end because of the disability and this once resulted in a very normal ferret game turning dangerous. I was cleaning out an indoor rabbit cage, he was "helping" climbed on to it and when he jumped down his leg slipped between the bars on top and he got caught hanging by his leg. He screamed, I scooped him to take the weight off his leg and he bit me by accident. He was fine luckily enough and was incredibly sorry for hurting me. I didn't let him near any barred or chicken wire platforms again because if I hadn't been right there, he could have broken his leg.

The other consideration is pain relief. If it gets to that stage, you can speak to your vet about pain medication but much like us there are other options which may be better long term. Massage, reiki, swimming, heat pads they can choose to lie on, low hammocks to take weight off joints can all help. It's mostly trial and error but figuring out what works for your pet can help a lot. Diet can also make a difference, adding glucosamine and omega oils (generally egg or ferret oil and grizzly joints like poultry feet) can help manage arthritis.

Elderly ferrets

With ferrets age creeps in slowly and there's nothing to be done. As a ferret gets older they become more at risk of arthritis, adrenal disease, insulinoma, kidney issues, estrogen toxicity, and heart issues. The only thing you can do is keep an eye on general health and address concerns.

For both adrenal and the sex specific problems the best way to prevent or address these is to implant or wait until an older age to neuter. Once a girl gets to an age where she does seem old to you, I would immediately book an implant for her to stop seasons taking their toll but with males if they are intact you are as well leaving them be, unless there is a specific issue you need to address.

Insulinoma and kidney problems are higher risk depending on choices made throughout the ferret's life but remember there is a genetic element so do not blame yourself. Insulinoma can be treated by medications but it can also be managed to an extent by feeding raw and making sure your ferret gets frequent small meals. If you do get an insulinoma diagnosis be sure to keep glucose syrup in your first aid box so that you can quickly raise their blood sugar in case of collapse or fitting. Kidney problems we can make a phosphorous low diet for supporting renal issues

which is discussed in the feeding section (bone alternatives). A pet water fountain can also help encourage drinking to help kidney problems.

We have discussed arthritis in the previous section that just leaves cardiac problems. A big sign is not weight loss but a shift in weight from muscle to a water filled belly, this is the clearest sign of heart trouble in particular but is often



missed due to a stable overall weight. Taurine is always helpful for supporting the heart and there are medications but one thing we discovered in helping an owner was hawthorn powder. This is a natural remedy for a number of issues but trialing on our own elderly and a few friends ferrets we are comfortable recommending it as a supplement to add to an elderly ferrets' diet. A sprinkle on their food seems to rejuvenate them and keep them in better condition longer. It is worth noting our boy who reached 14 had a hawthorn tree in his run.

As it amounts to enrichment an elderly ferret sleeps more but when awake enjoy the same love and care as they are used to. Encouraging play when awake keeps the body and mind young and ultimately gives you more time with them. Just let them go at their own pace and adapt things as necessary when health does impact their lives.

The last day

When your ferret reaches their last days you will know. It could be that their bodies are failing them too badly, or that they are in pain but there will come a day where you look at them and they tell you. My advice here may sound insane, but it is what we follow.

You know best. Do not let anyone tell you it's too soon or pressure you into doing it before you're both ready.

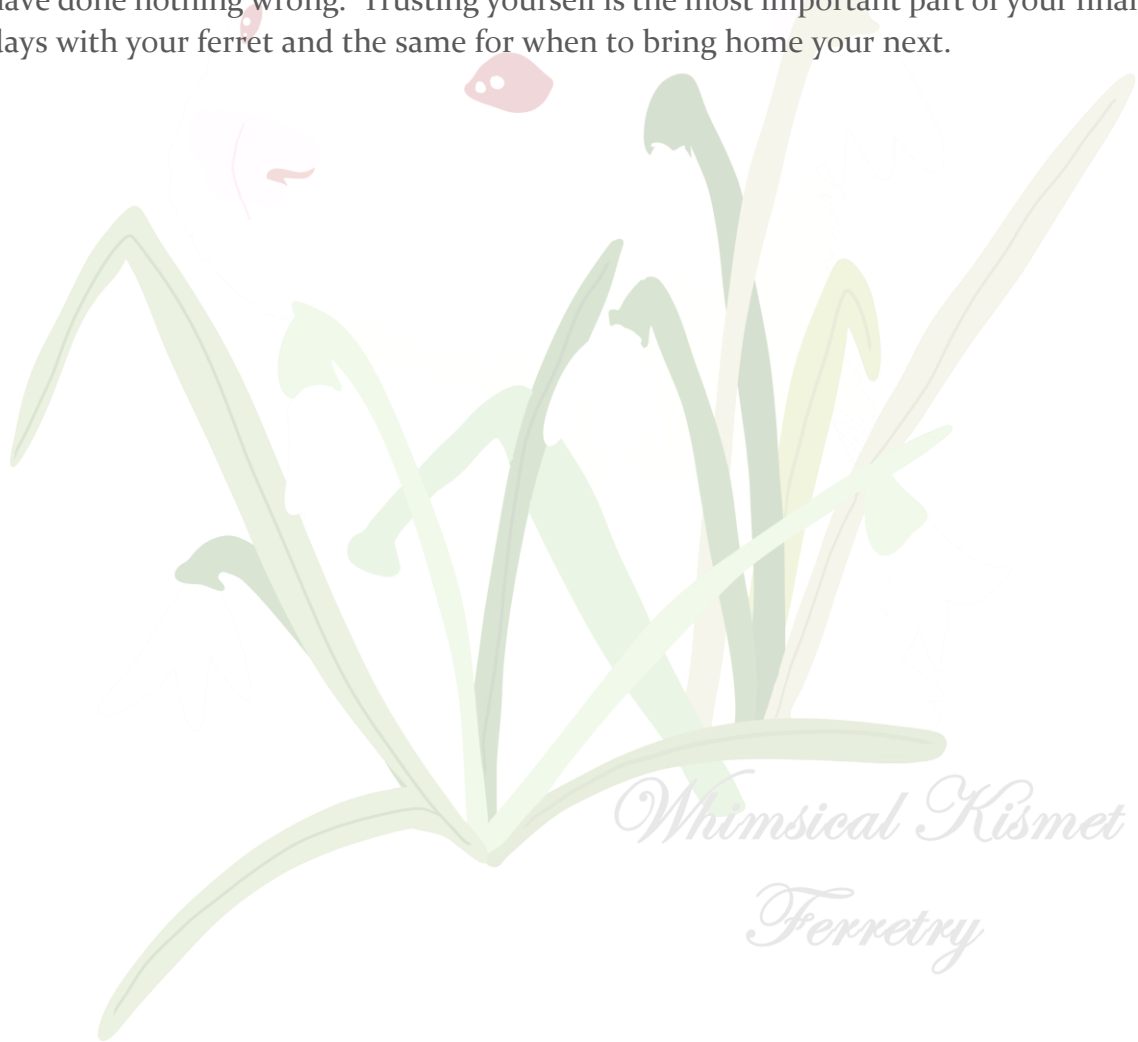
Tell them it's ok, if it hurts, if their tired, they can go. You love them and they love you, and sometimes they're only holding on for us.

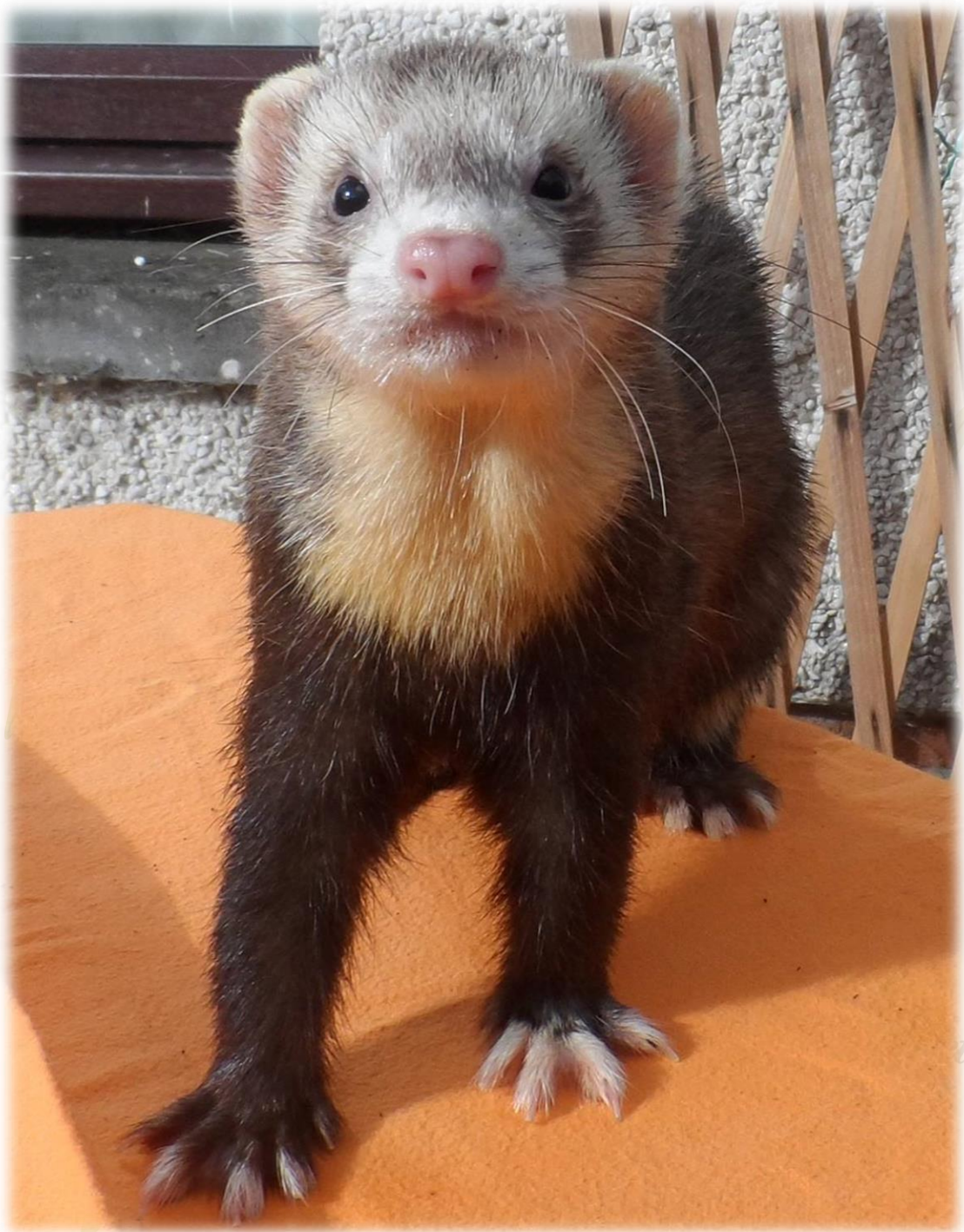
Be with them but let them have alone time. Some ferrets want you with them when they go into their last sleep, some seem to realize how hard that is for us and like to go in the minutes we're away from them.

If they need helped on their way be brave and stay with them. Remember this is the last thing you can do for them and they deserve to feel loved and comfortable. It helps to not think about what you're doing until afterwards so that you are calm, and they don't get distressed. Just stay with them, please.

Bring them home. It helps the others to realize what has happened if they can see and smell them afterwards. It makes a big difference in helping them move on.

Moving forwards there is no right or wrong time to do it. It is very individual. Some ferrets move on better with a new friend, some need a bit of time first, just like people. When you're ready, when it's right for you, is the right time. Some people are ready in days, some years. It is more common than you would expect for someone to look for a new arrival when they realize their older ferret is nearing their final year. This can help us when the time comes, we don't feel like we're replacing them, and we don't have to worry about their friend being alone. Sometimes it feels like fates whispering to us to just have a look and we find the perfect soul waiting for us. Occasionally once the new arrival has settled in the older ferret seems to pass the baton, it's their turn to look after you now and they can go on, even if they've never shown any sign of being ill before. This is Never your fault and you have done nothing wrong. Trusting yourself is the most important part of your final days with your ferret and the same for when to bring home your next.





Glossary

Hob (neutered)	Male ferret (Gibb, hobble)
Jill (neutered)	Female ferret (sprite)
Hoblet	Vasectomised hob
Kit	Baby ferret, up to 1 year old
Yearling	9 month to year old kit, within their first year
Veteran	Over 5 years
Business	Group of ferrets
<u>Seasons</u>	When a males testis are visible When a females vulva (girl bits) are swollen When ferrets can mate; when they are in heat/rut
neuter	Gender neutral, removal of ovaries and womb or testis; spay or castrate
Implant	Deslorelin implant; a chemical castration. Reversible and used for both sexes. Comes in 2 sizes
Vasectomy	Operation to sterilize a male without removal of sex organs
Jill jab	Injection of proligesterone to bring them out of season
<u>Behaviour</u>	
War dance	Series of jumping wiggles. Expression of happiness or excitement
Dook	Vocalization of interest or excitement
Tail wag	Better described as a wiggle. Expression of interest, excitement, and playful arousal
Death sleep	Unresponsive deep sleep. Ferret is completely limp, often hard to find signs of life. Behavioural quirk of ferrets. Does not pose any risk to health and is of no concern
Scream/bark	Vocalization of fear; is a loud noise, unmistakable
Poof	Release of defensive chemicals creating a strong bad smell. Primarily a form of defence, it is associated with fear however ferrets who do not routinely poof are known to sometimes release chemicals in their sleep
<u>Ferret descriptors</u>	
Fur/coat	Hair

Colour	The colour and pattern of the coat. All colours and markings can be found in all breeds. These are often used to separate ferrets into classes at shows
Markings	
Greyhound or bulldog build	Monikers of racier and heavier builds of ferrets. Any breed
Micro	Moniker of a very small ferret. Can be through dwarfism or diminutive breeding. Any breed
Breeds Standard	Domesticated ferret with no other breed in their background
EU (hybrid)	A domesticated European Polecat (descendant of an EU and another breed of ferret)
Angora	Ferrets of breeding with the angora gene which causes a long single coat, hair growth on the nose and extra clefts in the nose, as well as problems birthing and rearing kits. Split into other terms based on phenotype and perceived genotype. These are Full angora, half angora, semi angora and part angora
<u>Things to do with your ferret</u> Working ferret	A ferret who has a job. Traditionally pest control but includes less well known jobs
Ferreting Rabbiting Ratting	Pest control with ferrets. In all these pursuits the ferret chases and flushes quarry out of hiding to nets, guns or dogs allowing for a faster and more controlled dispatch than traps or poison
Wire running	Ferret dragging a wire through a tunnel. This is generally a telephone, ethernet or electricity wire
PR/public relations	These ferrets are ambassadors for ferrets. Their job is to meet members of the public and leave a good impression. Their training is just short of a trained therapy animal and generally includes harness training and the socialization to stay relaxed in exciting and busy surroundings
Ferret racing	Usually seen at a ferret show ferret racing is a race between ferrets to go through a tube with encouragement from a handler. It can be seen as a way to show off your ferrets' skills below ground but is really just a bit of fun
Ferret shows	A ferret competes against other ferrets on a point system. This is based on care, stature, merits and disposition. Ferrets are split by colour and sometimes breed. Can also include fun classes
Online ferret shows	As ferret shows but judges use pictures to determine points. An excellent way to get involved if you cannot travel to shows

Ferret facts

Breeding season	February to September (not exclusively)
Average litter size	7 (1-18)
Gestation	42 days
Average lifespan	8 presently, 6 – 10 average
Sexual maturity	From 3 months to 1 year
Scientific name	Mustela putorius furo
Weight	0.6-2 kg average, generally males larger and angora lines are heavier
Sleep period	14 - 18 hours' daily

Health check

- **first impression; how does the coat look? does the ferret seem happy? any fur loss?**
- **is he standing/moving normally?**
- **is he lethargic? is he responding normally?**
- **is he behaving oddly in any way?**

- **feel down his body; any lump, bumps or sore spots?**
- **is there any dirt, dandruff or other discrepancies near the skin?**
- **are the claws a good length?**
- **are the ears clean?**
- **are the eyes clean, clear and bright?**
- **is there any discharge from the nose/mouth?**
- **are the teeth ok?**
- **are the gums pink? red or white are worrying**
- **put your hand on his chest; is his heart beat normal?**
- **check his genitals, any discharge? Swollen vulva means a jill is in season and a sprite requires vet attention**
- **check their bum; is it clean?**

- **check the cage; is the poo normal? Are there any signs of blood?**
- **remove any old food and poop**

First Aid

I would 100% recommend a first aid course. Not only will it help you give immediate care/relief before you can get to a vet but it will also help you as an owner decide if you need an emergency appointment or indeed need vet care at all. Many vets do small animal first aid but I would say a canine first aid course is much more in depth and you also come away with a qualification. The first aid e-book we send home with our kits is useful but it's nothing compared to real experience and guidance.

This is our recommended first aid box for pet owners. It is important that without further experience and qualifications you do seek professional advice, but ferrets go downhill so fast. Hopefully, this will help you keep them comfortable and keep things under control until your appointment. Remember to keep them warm.

Item	Use
Saline solution	Clean any wound or eyes if needed
Swabs or cotton wool	Cleaning wounds and drying them
Cotton buds	Application of medicines to gums, ears, clean inside wounds
Syringe	Syringe feeding, giving medicine, measuring liquids
Oil	Distraction, to flush down medicines
Paw wax	Waterproofing incisions and wounds
Sudocreme	Dressing for shallow wounds
Anbesol gel or liquid	Teeth and gum issues, to numb gums and exposed nerves until vet treated
Thornit powder	Mild irritation, dirty ears with no sign of infection etc
Slippery elm bark	Stomach upsets, diarrhoea and sickness, firms' poo and lines stomach
Activated charcoal	Stomach upsets, following reaction to medication, following eating something questionable. Will cause black staining stool
Coconut oil	Feed for blockage, can be used for ear cleaning. Can also be used as a skin on an injury
Colloidal silver solution	A great dressing for areas where sudocreme is unsuitable i.e. near eyes etc
Vaseline/petroleum jelly	Use as a skin, to soften scabs and burns

Recipes for emergency care

Honey/Glucose syrup

If you find your ferret unresponsive, they may have low blood sugar, a “hit” of sugar can save their lives. If you need to do this it is an emergency. Get them stable then get to the vet.

Duck soup

Can be any kind of fowl. Add half a dozen meaty bones (wings, drumsticks etc) to a pot and add hot water to just cover. Simmer until meat is falling off the bone. Keep the stock and remove the meaty bones. Take the meat off the bones and add back to the stock, discard the bones. Add a tablespoon of ferret/salmon oil and a raw egg to the stock and blend until smooth. Store in the fridge for up to 4 days. Can be stored up to 6 months in the freezer. Can be diluted further if needed and fed in bowl or by syringe. Top tip; pour into ice cube molds/bags and freeze. Take out a cube as needed.

Hydration solution

Add half a teaspoon of salt and 2 tablespoons of sugar to 1.05 liters of boiling water. Stir until dissolved. Keeps for a week in the fridge or 6 months in the freezer. Top tip; pour into ice cube molds/bags and freeze. Take out a cube as needed.

*Whimsical Kismet
Ferretry*