

Handling Ferrets

Our topics for this week are:

- Ferret behavior
- Approaching and catching ferrets
- Handling ferrets

FERRETS

European ferrets (*Mustela putorius furo*) evolved from domestication of the European polecat (*M. putorius*). Ferrets have been domesticated since the days of the ancient Roman Empire (300 BC) when they were used to hunt rodents that endangered Roman grain stores. Later, the Romans used ferrets to control an overpopulation of rabbits. Rabbit hunting with ferrets was common practice in Europe and Asia during the Middle Ages. To protect the rabbit pelt and meat, ferrets were selectively bred for their ability to be handled and their burrow flushing skill. Some also wore a harness with a long leash, a muzzle, or a bell. Ferrets would flush the European rabbits from their burrows where the rabbits would then be caught with nets or by trained dogs or falcons. In the mid-19th century, ferrets were bred for their fur, and in the 20th century, they were used to run lead wires and cables during building and airplane construction. They became popular in the U.S. as a companion pet in the late 1960s.

The black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*), which is indigenous to North America, is a different species and not domesticated. Domesticated European ferrets have been in North America for 300 years. They are illegal in some states (California and Hawaii), territories (Puerto Rico), and cities (New York City and Washington, D.C.) due to the concern that they would become prolific and prey on indigenous wildlife if the ferrets became feral. This biopollution has occurred in the Shetland Islands and New Zealand.

Domestic ferrets were selectively bred for white hair coats during the Middle Ages so that they could be more easily located. However, ferrets with predominately white haircoats often have Waardenburg syndrome, an inherited trait causing a broadened skull and partial or total deafness. Ferrets are also an animal model for research on human influenza.

Male ferrets are referred to as a **hob**, females as a **jill**, spayed females as a **sprite**, castrated males as a **gib**, and vasectomized males as a **hoblet**. Immature ferrets are called **kits**.

Natural Behavior of Ferrets

Ferrets are approximately the same size as domestic cats with a longer body and shorter legs. Males are substantially larger than females. They have nonretractable claws that should not be removed but require frequent trimming. Their anal sacs are used like scent glands in skunks. Most body odor comes from sebaceous glands that are stimulated by male hormones, androgens.

Ferrets hunt prey in burrows and are fearless with short attention spans. They are also extremely curious and will explore every aspect of their environment, especially holes, ducts, rugs, blankets, and tunnels. Their fearless aggression is most evident in three to four-month-old males when they play bite each other to establish their group hierarchy and practice their predator skills. Females are more independent and more likely to aggressively bite than males.

Unlike their more solitary wild cousins, domesticated ferrets like living in groups with established familiarity. A group of domesticated ferrets is called a *business*. New members to the group must be introduced slowly and carefully because ferrets are territorial. Adult males, use perianal scent gland secretions, body oils, and sometimes urine and feces to mark their territory and possessions. They will also groom themselves with their urine to attract jills.

Ferrets are crepuscular, most active at dawn and dusk, although they can become imprinted with more diurnal activity during their critical socialization period with humans (four to 10 weeks of age). They are nearsighted and depend more on detection of odors and their hearing to sense changes within their environment. They search their surroundings by sniffing the ground and often sneeze. Their vision adapts slowly to sudden bright light or darkness. Their pupils are horizontal, in contrast to the vertical pupils of cats. Horizontal pupils may aid seeing prey (rabbits) with hopping gaits, while vertical pupils may aid tracking of prey (mice) with flat horizontal movements. They like to chase bouncing hard rubber balls or Ping-Pong balls. Balls should be hard enough to prevent the ferret from eating pieces of it and large enough not to be swallowed whole to prevent developing an intestinal obstruction. The sound range best heard by ferrets is high frequency, eight to more than 16 kHz, which is the vocal range of their prey.

Food odors are important with olfactory imprinting in young ferrets. Food preferences are developed during their socialization period between 60 and 90 days of age. They will hide (“ferret away”) food or favorite toys in an area in their territory that seems the most inaccessible to other animals. Ferret is Latin (*furittus*) for “little thief.”

When awake, ferrets are boundlessly energetic, but it is normal for them to sleep 12 to 16 hours per day. They like to sleep in enclosed areas or piled with group members. If excited and happy and wanting to play, ferrets will perform the “dance of joy”, jumping in differing directions in a whimsical manner like that of a baby goat, bumping carelessly into objects. A similar excitement “war dance” will occur with the tail hair fluffed out.

Vocalizations include the “dook” (also called chuckling) to express excitement. If angered or frustrated, they may make a hissing sound, arch their back, and fluff out hair on their tail. If endangered, they will scream. Barking, chirping, or squeaking is used when a ferret is frightened and defensive.

Approaching and Catching

Approaching a ferret is similar to the method of approaching cats. Pastes of food treats on a tongue depressor will attract and distract a ferret for a short time during an acclimation period to a handler. They particularly like fish oil flavored pastes. Gentle ferrets can be captured and picked up like a cat. They often like to hide in a large pocket or bag, when carried. When approaching a ferret for the first time, the handler should keep his fingers curled when reaching toward it. If unsure of the ferret’s disposition, the handler can use a thick towel to cover the ferret and block its vision prior to capture. To gain control of a resistant ferret, a handler should scruff the ferret and lift it off its feet. This usually has a calming effect and will cause them to yawn. After the skin on the back of the neck and shoulders is scruffed, the second hand is placed under the rump to support the weight of the body during restraint.

Domesticated ferrets have retained their predatory characteristics of their wild ancestors: constant searching for prey and aggressive play, including play biting. For this reason, a ferret’s face should never be held near a handler’s face. Ferrets are generally docile and receptive to

gentle handling used on dogs and cats, but if scared, they can inflict severe bites out of fear. If bitten, a handler should not put a ferret down immediately after a play bite or it will develop a habit of biting to be released. Due to the risk of bites to the face or fingers, babies and other young children should not handle or be left alone with ferrets. Ferrets do not bare their teeth before a bite.

Ferrets practice their fearless aggression in play fighting with each other. During play fighting, they may bite, hold on, and shake their head right and left. Ferrets, particularly younger ones, may bite a handler as an expression of play aggression. Other causes for bites are from being startled, territorial aggression of toys, fear-based aggression from previous poor handling, and maternal aggression. Congenital deafness occurs in some ferrets with white in their hair coat. Deaf ferrets are more easily startled than in normal ferrets. Odors on the handlers hand, such as hand lotion or tobacco may also stimulate a ferret to nip.

Controlling nips and bites should include frequent quiet handling and positive reinforcement of good behavior, beginning during their juvenile period. Removing kits from their mother too early and a lack of maternal discipline, can result in a lack of respect for other animals and rougher play aggression. Reactions to bite or nips should be to briefly place the ferret to a special cage or crate (not its normal sleeping cage or crate), without toys or food for a time out, deprived of attention or reward.

If ferrets are allowed to escape during handling, they will seek safety in very small spaces. Therefore, all possible exits, cabinets, drawers, etc. must be blocked prior to beginning a handling session. Ferrets should wear a collar with a bell to help locate it if it escapes.

Handling for Routine Care and Management

Distraction with food treats is sufficient for minor examinations. Greater restraint than simply picking a ferret up and carrying it involves grasping the ferret firmly with one hand around the shoulders and neck. Ferrets are well muscled and require a firm grip. The handler's thumb and index finger should be positioned beneath the jaw to prevent it turning its head to bite.

Ferrets can be scruffed with the skin on the neck while their hind legs are held to mildly stretch the ferret out, in the same manner as a scruff and stretch hold for cats. Precautions need to be taken so the ferret cannot fall. They should never be scruffed and held above the floor since they may escape the restraint grip and fall. They should be held over a table with a padded surface. Ferrets have muscular necks, unlike other small tame animals. Although they must be held tighter than other small animals, excessive force will cause greater struggling and should be avoided. Towel wraps provide greater restraint when needed.

Nail trimming is needed every two weeks. This can normally be done while gently holding the ferret in a handler's arms or lap, if the ferret was gently handled and desensitized for nail trimming beginning as a juvenile.

Now, let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- Based on gender or age, ferrets are referred to as a hob, jill, sprite, gib, hoblet, or kit.
- Ferrets can acquire and possibly die from human influenza.
- Ferrets hop around called "dances" to a willingness to play or fight.

- Most handling of ferrets is similar to handling of housecats.

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Don't forget serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.