

The Natural Behavior of Ferrets

Our topics for this week are:

- **The history of pet ferrets**
- **Congenital deafness in some pet ferrets**
- **Unique behaviors of ferrets**

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Pet Ferret Origin

European ferrets evolved from domestication of the European polecat. 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 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 they 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, 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 non retractable 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.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

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

- 1. Pet ferrets are from Europe.**
- 2. White ferrets may have congenital deafness**
- 3. Healthy ferrets sleep 12 to 16 hours per day.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 250 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

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.