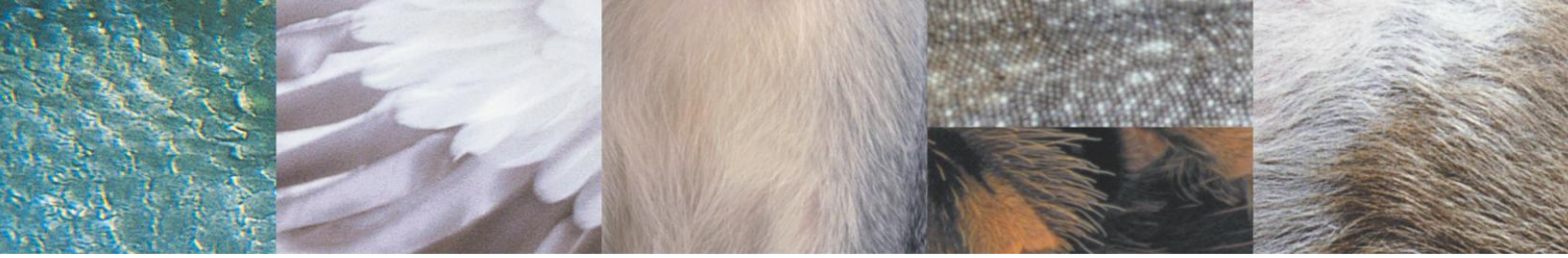

Supplementary resources for members of local ethical review processes

Ferrets: Good practice for housing and care

Research Animals Department, RSPCA
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Before using these guidance notes, please read the introductory sheet that accompanies this series: *Supplementary resources for lay members: An introduction*.

Natural history

The ferret (*Mustela putorius furo*) belongs to the family Mustelidae, in common with badgers, weasels, stoats and otters. It is the same species as the European polecat (*Mustela putorius*) and is thought to be a domesticated form. Domestication began at least 2,500 years ago and involved selecting for more docile animals who could be used to help hunt for rabbits or rodents.

Ferrets are carnivores who live for 8 to10 years in captivity. They are highly intelligent, lively, agile, playful and very inquisitive. They have flexible, short-legged bodies perfectly designed for exploring, particularly underground. They are able to vocalise and produce a number of different sounds. Their sense of smell is acute and very important - scent glands communicate information relating to sex, status, age and reproductive condition and they may release a foul smelling liquid from their anal glands when frightened. Their sense of smell, together with sensitive whiskers, can guide them through total darkness.

Ferrets spend up to 75% of the day asleep, and are typically very active for short periods then sleep soundly for several hours. The rest of their time is spent exploring their environment and playing and interacting with other ferrets.

They have an undeserved reputation for being aggressive. They may play roughly with each other, but respond well to frequent handling and rapidly become friendly to human handlers.

What ferrets need

The following list of requirements has been defined by researching the literature on ferret behaviour and welfare. More information on ferret welfare, housing and care can be found in the references listed at the end of this document. The UFAW handbook is particularly good for this species [1].

- **Social housing**

Ferrets are highly social animals and females (jills) without litters, young animals and castrated males (hobbles) should be housed in pairs or small groups of compatible individuals. Such animals should not be singly housed without compelling veterinary, welfare or scientific reasons.

Females with litters should be kept separately as should females in late pregnancy (*i.e.* within two weeks of the expected birth date). It may also be necessary to singly house un-neutered males during the breeding season, as they can become aggressive and fight vigorously with other males.

Young animals from the same litter usually get on well together and can therefore be weaned into groups; weaning should not be before six weeks of age unless there is veterinary justification.

It is important to keep groups stable throughout the animals' lives. Note that even in the most stable and harmonious groups, rough play behaviour such as neck-biting and wrestling may be observed. This helps to practice the skills that would have been required in the wild for territory

protection and hunting, and rarely leads to serious injury. Aggressive interactions between adults may occasionally be rougher, or more serious, so enclosures should be designed to include areas where ferrets can hide from and avoid each other.

- **A stimulating enriched environment in a spacious home pen**

The nature of ferrets means they require a stimulating environment to prevent boredom and the development of abnormal behaviours. Enclosures should be large enough to provide plenty of space for exercise, social interaction and exploration, and to allow provision of sufficient environmental enrichment. They are highly motivated to explore tunnels and burrows and so their home pen should be furnished with items such as cardboard tubes, paper bags and lengths of drainpipe (wide enough to prevent animals becoming trapped inside). This also provides refuges where they can escape from other individuals.

Ferrets cannot climb especially well, but they can make short jumps, and once they have a grip on something can pull themselves up. The height of enclosures should therefore not only allow the animals to rear and stand upright on their hind legs, but if possible, allow for the addition of raised platforms or shelves at different heights which provide climbing opportunities and increase the usable space within the pen. Ferrets also like to chew, chase or drag toys such as wooden cotton reels - never use rubber toys as these can cause intestinal blockages if parts are chewed and swallowed. Water baths are another good enrichment and animals will use these extensively. Their motivation to explore also means the pen needs to be escape proof!

- **Solid flooring with litter material**

The floor of the enclosure should have a solid base and should be covered with wood shavings or sawdust litter (avoiding cedar or pinewood because of the volatile chemicals these can release). Deep litter systems are considered to provide further enrichment, as food and toys can be hidden within the litter to encourage exploratory behaviour.

- **A separate sleeping area with nesting material**

A separate, enclosed, dry and warm area should be provided for sleeping. This can simply be a cardboard or wooden box with cotton cloth or similar material for bedding, along with some fresh hay, straw or paper. A nest-box is essential for pregnant and nursing females, to provide comfort, security and warmth.

- **Separate toilet area**

Ferrets mark their territories with urine and faeces as well as their anal gland secretions. They will usually urinate or defecate routinely in the same place, against a vertical surface, away from their sleeping and eating areas and adequate space should be provided to allow for this. A litter tray with dust-free litter can be placed in the area favoured by the ferret, to help with cleaning.

- **Suitable diet**

Ferrets are carnivores so their food should be primarily meat-based. They require a diet high in protein and fat, but low in fibre, which can be provided by using a top-quality dry cat food or specialist dry ferret food. Dog foods or lower quality cat foods are not suitable as they contain cereal and plant proteins in their formula which cannot be digested by ferrets.

Cooked meat scraps and cooked (not raw) eggs are acceptable “treat” foods and provide some variety and interest, although care should be taken not to include anything containing small bones.

- **Positive, calm and confident handling and interaction with humans**

Ferrets are intelligent, gregarious animals and will bond strongly with their human carers. They become very amenable to handling if this is done regularly (at least daily) from an early age and throughout their lives. The more frequent the interaction with humans, the more placid the animals will usually become.

Handling should be gentle but firm. The animal’s hindquarters should always be supported as spinal problems may develop if ferrets are routinely lifted and moved with one hand. They have poor eyesight so movements towards them should be smooth and deliberate - they might bite if nervous or alarmed, or may mistake a hesitantly waved finger for food! They will show they are unhappy or defensive by arching their backs and hissing or screeching with an open mouth, or snapping their jaws. When they are excited and playful, they may perform a frenzied series of sideways hops, often referred to as a “weasel war dance”.

Extra care should be taken with pregnant females as they may well become aggressive and very protective of their young.

Potential husbandry related welfare problems and how to resolve them

Ferrets may become **irritable, nervous, bored or show stereotypies** (such as repetitive running), if their environment is lacking in suitable stimulation, or if space for exercise is restricted. Any abnormal or stereotypic behaviour should prompt a full review of housing and care, especially space allowance and environmental stimulation.

Female ferrets kept in the absence of a male during the breeding season may remain in oestrus for several months (**hyperoestrogenism**). This may cause the external genital organs of the female to become very swollen and tender. In addition, the formation of blood and blood cells can be suppressed and severe anaemia may occur. A vet should be consulted as to whether it would be appropriate to mate the female with a vasectomised male or give the female hormones in order to manage this condition.

Ferret husbandry and care: ERP aide-memoire

- ❖ Social housing in compatible pairs or small groups for females, young animals and castrated males (note females at a late stage of pregnancy or with litters, and males in the breeding season, will need to be housed separately) ❑
- ❖ A stimulating environment in a spacious home pen with sufficient height to allow the animals to stand upright on their hind legs ❑
- ❖ Solid flooring with deep litter ❑
- ❖ A separate enclosed dry and warm sleeping area with bedding material ❑
- ❖ A separate toilet area away from sleeping and eating areas ❑
- ❖ Refuges to enable individuals to get away from each other if necessary ❑
- ❖ Environmental enrichment (such as cardboard tubes, drainpipes, raised platforms, water baths) to allow exploratory and play behaviour ❑
- ❖ Objects to chew, drag or chase ❑
- ❖ Nest boxes for pregnant/nursing females ❑
- ❖ A suitable diet with some ‘treat’ foods ❑
- ❖ Regular, positive, calm handling and interaction with humans from early in life ❑

Notes

Recommended references

1. Plant M & Lloyd M (2010) The ferret. Ch. 29 in: *The UFAW Handbook on the Care and Management of Laboratory and Other Research Animals*, 8th edn, pp 418-431. Wiley-Blackwell.

2. FELASA (2007) *Euroguide on the Accommodation and Care of Animals Used for Experimental and Other Scientific Purposes: Based on the Revised Appendix A of the European Convention ETS123* London: FELASA. Available for purchase at www.rsmpress.co.uk/bkfelasa.htm

3. Wolfensohn S & Lloyd M (2003) Carnivores. Chapter 14 in: *Handbook of Laboratory Animal Management and Welfare*, 3rd edn. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

4. Lloyd M (1999) *Ferrets: Health, Husbandry and Diseases*. Oxford: Blackwell Science Ltd.

5. Fox JG (ed) (1998) *Biology and Diseases of the Ferret*, 2nd edn. Philadelphia: Williams and Wilkins.

6. Porter V & Brown N (1993) *The Complete Book of Ferrets*. Bedford: D&M Publications.

7. NC3Rs (2008) *Ferrets*. www.nc3rs.org.uk/informationportal ; click on *Ferrets*.

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