

LEARNING MADE EASY



3rd Edition

Ferrets

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Choose the
perfect ferret

Learn what foods
and toys they love

Deal with behavior issues
and interpret actions

Kim Schilling

Founder of Animals for Awareness



Ferrets

3rd Edition

by Kim Schilling

for
dummies
A Wiley Brand

Ferrets For Dummies® , 3rd Edition

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Introduction

Numerous people have told me that a true love for animals may be genetically predisposed. Maybe this is true. Or maybe some animals just tug at our heartstrings a little harder than others. I believe both statements to apply to me. Although my love for animals may be termed “genetics” by the white-coated scientists in those sterile laboratories, I prefer to call what was passed on to me a blessing. I knew the moment my eyes locked onto a bouncing, chattering ferret that I’d been hooked by something mysteriously fascinating. Each one of my ferrets has provided me with much happiness and joy over the years. Even though all my ferrets, young and old, share in common the ability to make me break out in laughter with their habitual silliness, each one is a unique little fuzzball. And they continuously amaze me with their intelligence and social play.

Ferrets are fun and mischievous. They’re cunning looters. They can steal and break your heart. They come in all sorts of colors and sizes. Ferrets can get into the littlest cracks and holes, both in your home and in your soul. They’re bound to make you break out in uncontrollable laughter at least once a day. They steal any chance they can to dance and dook and chatter about. And when they’re through amazing you with their antics, most ferrets love nothing more than to curl up somewhere warm with you and snooze the rest of the day away.

Sound like the perfect pet? Not necessarily. As a shelter director, my motto is “Not all animals make good pets for people, and not all people make good parents for pets.” No two households, people, or lifestyles are the same.

Although ferrets can bring you plenty of joy, they also can be quite challenging at times.

That's why I wrote this book about these amazing creatures. If you don't yet have a ferret, this book can help you decide whether a fuzzy is for you. And if you already have a ferret, this book can help you give him the best possible care. To boot, this book offers practical health and medical information. And everything from cover to cover is in cut-to-the-chase format — only what you need to know, in good ol' plain English.

About This Book

You have plenty to discover — and a lot of responsibility to take on — when you decide to adopt a ferret. Pet ownership isn't something to take lightly. You should always make a lifetime commitment when deciding to bring any pet into your home. This book helps you gain better insight into what's required so that you can make the right choices for your lifestyle.

This book doesn't require a read from cover to cover (of course, you can read it that way if you want to). Instead, this book is a reference guide. If you have a particular topic you want to research, you can turn right to the chapter that covers the topic.

Each chapter is divided into sections, and each section contains pieces of info about some part of ferret keeping — things like this:

- » Is a ferret the right pet for you?
- » How do I pick a healthy ferret?
- » What steps do I take to ferret-proof my home?
- » How do I set up my ferret's cage?

- » What medical conditions require a vet's care?

Foolish Assumptions

In writing *Ferrets For Dummies*, 3rd Edition, I made some assumptions about my readers:

- » You're one of the thousands and thousands of people out there who has a nagging child or spouse who whines daily about wanting to own a ferret. Or maybe you've had your emotions kidnapped by a ferret, and you want to make sure that a ferret is the pet for you before you adopt him.
- » Perhaps you're one of those lucky folks who already owns a ferret, and you want to know how to properly care for him.
- » You may be a volunteer or employee at a ferret shelter, humane society, veterinarian clinic, or pet shop. You've been given (or have volunteered for) the task of ferret-keeper, and you want to know about caring for these fantastic furballs.
- » You may be a "seasoned" ferret owner who's soon to discover that this book covers topics that you can't find in other ferret books, such as behavior challenges, alternative diet, and saying goodbye.
- » You may be one of the many who realize the growing need for — and importance of — enrichment in the lives of our ferrets and value the extensive information provided by this book on enrichment.
- » You may be a veterinarian who wants to know as much about the ferrets you treat — including basic history — as you do about the people who bring them in.

Whatever made you pick up this book, hold onto your hat, because you're in for the thrill of a lifetime!

Icons Used in This Book

To help you navigate this book full of great information, I include icons that point out helpful hints, fun facts, and things you'd be wise to keep in mind. In a nutshell, the icons do the following:



TIP

This icon provides tidbits of info that can make your life as a ferret mom or dad a little easier. Many of these tips were discovered by people, including myself, who learned some ferret-owning facts the hard way.



**TECHNICAL
STUFF**

This icon points out interesting and sometimes technical ferret facts — some of which I stumbled upon while researching for this book. Not all this stuff makes for good dinner conversation, but you're never too old to learn. Consider this information interesting but nonessential.



WARNING

Don't glaze over the information accompanying this icon. Paying attention to what's here can save your ferret's life or prevent injury and illness — perhaps even major vet bills.



REMEMBER

The paragraph(s) accompanying this icon points out important stuff that you should store in an easily accessed part of your brain.

Beyond the Book

You can find a little more helpful ferrets-related information on <https://www.dummies.com>, where you can peruse this book's Cheat Sheet. To get this handy resource, go to the website and type *Ferrets For Dummies Cheat Sheet* in the Search box.

Where to Go from Here

If you're thinking about getting a ferret, or you want to know how to get a healthy one, start at the beginning with [Parts 1](#) and [2](#). If you already have a ferret, you can delve into whatever chapter you want, hopping around as issues or problems arise, or as time permits.

Bottom line? Enjoy this book as it was meant to be enjoyed. Remember: People learn new things every day about ferrets. And the best teachers are our ferrets themselves. Don't be afraid to ask questions from the experts, such as your vet. Doing so is well worth the time, and it makes ferret parenting a much more pleasant experience. Besides, asking is the only way you can learn.

Part 1

Is a Ferret Right for You?

IN THIS PART ...

Discover what a ferret is and isn't, from colors and patterns to wild and domestic classifications.

Uncover the secrets of ferrets in the past and present.

You'll get the lowdown on the legal aspects of owning ferrets.

Chapter 1

What You Need to Know About Ferrets

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Reviewing the description of a ferret
 - » Listing the basic ferret info, from color to odor
 - » Understanding the fuzzy's exercise needs
 - » Addressing the financial and legal matters that ferrets bring
 - » Incorporating the ferret into your home
 - » Introducing your fuzzy to other kids and pets
-

To the undiscerning eye, she looks a little rat-like. But she acts and moves more like a cat. Sometimes, she fools you and becomes quite dog-like. She resembles some animals you see roaming your backyard or other curious critters featured on a nature television show. And at some point, you'll witness some people in a pet store pointing at a cage full of them, inquiring, "Good heavens, what in the world are those? Opossums?" I think not!

The lovable animal I refer to is the ferret, of course. She belongs to a colorful clan of creatures and often gets mistaken for different animals. In this chapter, I tell you all about the ferret's vast family, his close and distant relatives, and his interesting history. (And for you technical readers, I throw in all sorts of Latin lingo that may confuse even the professionals out there.)

SPEAKING FERRET LATIN

The ferret's scientific name as of press time, preferred mostly by North-American scientists, is *Mustela putorius furo*. This name exists because of the beliefs concerning the function and nature of the ferret. For those of you who don't speak Ferret Latin, *Mustela* means "weasel" or "mouse killer." *Putorius* is derived from the Latin word *putoris*, meaning "stench," and *furo* is derived from the Latin word *furis*, meaning "thief." The word *ferret* itself is derived from the Latin word *furonem*, which also means "thief." Put all this together and you have one little "stinky mouse-killing thief." Although the historical ferret may have lived up to this dubious title, today's ferret is more often than not a cuddly little furball. For all practical purposes, I fondly refer to my ferrets as *Ferretus majorus pleasorus* in the comfort of my nonscientific home!

Some scientists who agree with me are now challenging the beliefs about ferrets — particularly some of the DNA evidence, as used in some paternity tests. The white coats doing most of the ancestral and DNA research are Europeans who prefer to call the ferret *Mustela furo*. Currently, several papers exist that support *Mustela furo*. The scientific name of our domestic ferret may very well change in the near future.

And before you actually run out and get your new family member, you must consider all the things your ferret will require of you — space, safety, and so on — so I cover these things here as well. After all, how can you promise to be a good mom or dad to your fuzzy if you don't even know what goes into good ferret parenting? Taking an honest look at the requirements can mean the difference between living happily with a new family member and taking on a major, unwelcome chore.

First Question: What Is a Ferret?

Although ferrets may look rodent-like with their long, pointed snouts and ticklish whiskers (see [Figure 1-1](#)), they're not rodents at all. Ferrets come from the order *Carnivora*, which simply means "meat or flesh eating."

This order encompasses a huge group of animals, from Fifi the common lap dog to the mighty African lion. Within the order Carnivora, ferrets belong to the family *Mustelidae*, which they proudly share with such bold critters as the badger, wolverine, pine marten, and otters. Included in that family are both domesticated ferrets and ferret-like wild animals such as the weasel, European polecat, steppe polecat, black-footed ferret, and mink.



FIGURE 1-1: They may look like rodents, but ferrets are actually carnivores.



REMEMBER

The word *ferret* is appropriately derived from the Latin word *Furonem*, which means “thief.” As a new ferret owner, you’ll quickly realize just how thieving your new family member can be. As cute as this endearing trait may be at times, it has its downsides. It once took me over a day to find all the contents of my purse, which I foolishly left open in the presence of roving ferrets.



REMEMBER

Many ferret owners call their pets a variety of nicknames. Some of the names that I use throughout this book are fuzzy, carpet shark, snorkeler, furball, and fuzzbutt. I know that many more terms of endearment exist out there. Don't get confused!

Giving the Ferret a Physical: Examining Fuzzy Characteristics

Before you bring a new fuzzy home or in the early stages of your ferret parenthood, you need to become familiar with a ferret's physical inventory. When I say physical, I pretty much mean all the general stuff regarding a ferret's physical characteristics, from his paws and claws to his weight and remarkable (and not-so-remarkable) senses.

Take a look at [Figure 1-2](#) if you really want to get down to the bones, literally, of examining a ferret's physical makeup! For information on ferret coats and colors, see [Chapter 2](#).

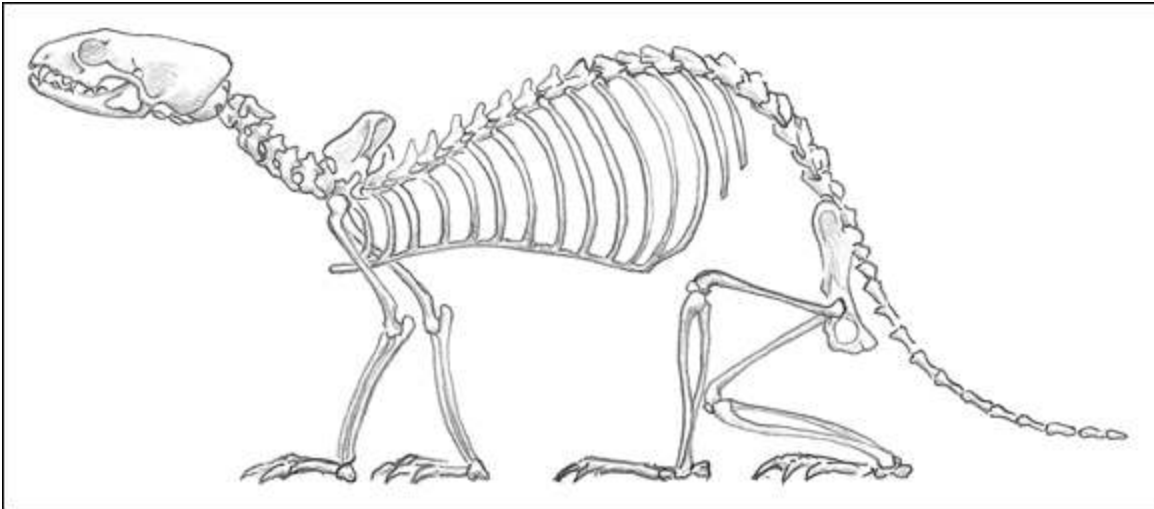


FIGURE 1-2: A ferret's skeleton, displaying the ferret's long spine.

In the following sections, I introduce you to the physical characteristics of the ferret. My version of a ferret physical also covers other tidbits you should know, like color combos and life span, because knowing how to accessorize your fuzzy and how long you'll be caring for him is important.

Looking at the life span of a fuzzy

Since publishing the second edition of *Ferrets For Dummies* in 2007, I would have expected the six-to-eight-year life span of ferrets to have increased, yet I find it has stayed the same or even decreased slightly. Although I've still heard many stories of ferrets that have lived for up to nine or ten years, barring any unforeseen mishaps, my belief remains that a ferret's environment — his caging, disease, stress (including overcrowding), diet, and so on — plays a role in his short life span. As ferret owners discover more about the ferret and realize how important husbandry and the reduction of stress are, they might possibly see that increase in ferret life span within their own lifetime.

For now, though, you can only do your best to make your ferret's quality of life top-notch. At 1 year old, your fuzzy

is considered full grown. At 3 to 4, he's considered middle-aged, and at 5 to 6 years of age, he's considered a geriatric, or an old fert! At this time, she may begin to slowly lose weight and start encountering debilitating illnesses. This is when things get tough and you're faced with difficult choices (see [Chapter 17](#) for advice on saying goodbye to your fuzzy).



REMEMBER As heartbreaking as it is, ferrets are prone to many diseases and may be genetically or medically flawed. Like most companion pets, whose life spans are short compared to humans, ferrets' lives are compacted into only six to eight oh-so-short years. The average human has 65 to 70 years to experience what a ferret experiences in under a decade. The ferret is an amazing trooper with a tremendous fight for life, and you can certainly do your part to help. See [Chapters 15](#) and [16](#) for more on the conditions that can afflict your fuzzy and for tips on how to care for him.

In this corner, weighing in at ...

A carpet shark's size makes him an ideal pet for both the apartment dweller and the homeowner. As is the case with some mammal species, unneutered male ferrets typically measure up to two times larger than females — called *sexual dimorphism*. There is a notable weight difference in the head and torso, where the male is wider and less dainty.

A typical altered female ferret weighs between a slim $\frac{3}{4}$ of a pound (0.3 kg) and a whopping $2\frac{1}{2}$ pounds (1.1 kg) — and that's a big girl. Neutered males normally weigh 2 to $3\frac{1}{2}$ pounds (0.9 to 1.6 kg), and unaltered males may

weigh in at 4 to 6 pounds (1.8 to 2.7 kg) or more. In tape-measure terms, without the tail, female ferrets are between 13 and 14 inches (33 and 35.5 cm) long, and males generally measure between 15 and 16 inches (38 and 40.6 cm). A ferret's tail is 3 to 4 inches (7.6 to 10 cm) long. See [Figure 1-3](#).

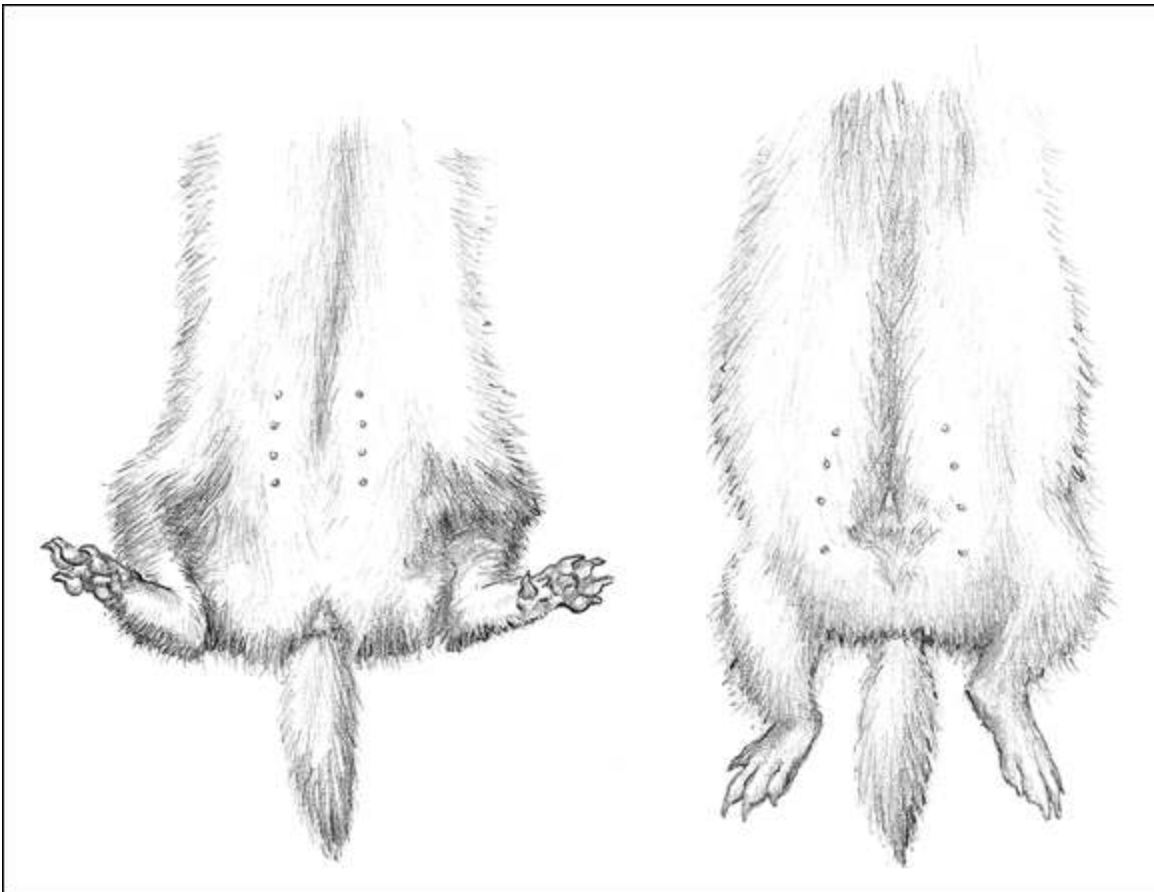


FIGURE 1-3: Male ferrets are bulkier, with the location of the penis resembling belly buttons. Females are smaller and have vulval openings near the anus.



REMEMBER

Ferrets are kind of like humans in that they tend to bulk up in the winter. Sometimes ferrets gain 40 percent of their weight at this time of the year and then lose it in the spring (as do humans, right?). This isn't always the rule, though; some ferrets always

seem skinny, and others are belly draggers all year round. Could it have something to do with health and/or exercise? Better check it out. ([Parts 3](#) and [4](#) of this book cover various issues related to exercise and health.)

Getting to the point about claws and teeth

On each of a ferret's soft paws is a set of five non-retractable claws or nails designed for digging and grasping. Nature designed the nails to stay there for a ferret's benefit and survival, so you should never remove them. Frequent clipping, about every 7–10 days, is recommended (see [Chapter 9](#) for more on grooming tips and [Chapter 6](#) for more on ferret-proofing your home).



WARNING Declawing your ferret is a big, fat no-no. For a ferret, declawing is a painful, mutilating surgery with way more risks than benefits. They need their claws for digging, grasping, walking, and playing. The base of the claw gives the ferret's foot added strength to support his weight. Removing the claws causes foot problems and/or pain when walking. If you think you'll be too lazy to clip your ferret's nails, you must recognize that a ferret isn't the pet for you.

Like all carnivores (see the first section in this chapter), ferrets have large canine teeth that can be rather intimidating. A ferret's teeth usually hang lower than his lip flap and are in full view. Although any animal with a mouth can and will bite under certain circumstances, I've found the biting ferret to be the exception rather than the rule. Most ferrets use their canine teeth to show off to their friends and to eat. When a ferret nips, she