

A Quest for Knowledge
My Introduction to Ferrets – 9 October 2000

I had spent the last 10 years or so being the cage cleaner and food giver to a line of lovely pet rats. For a busy person who really only has evenings to oneself and a limited amount of space, rats are the perfect pet. Clean, relatively odourless, playful, cheap to feed and house, and they enjoy being petted and love time out of the cage. However, the downside of pet rats is their health. For whatever reason, the rats I kept (and of several friends) seemed quite prone to respiratory infections and tumours and for such wonderful trusting creatures they had an unfortunately short life span of only 2 years. After losing so many furry friends to ill health and a short life – I decided that I needed to widen my horizons to the possibility of another type of animal.

By this point in life, I had a fair amount of space house-wise, a husband who could help in looking after an animal and slightly more time on my hands. We had moved recently and had a park and woodlands just across the road. We were both wanting a companion animal. With all this space it seemed that a dog would perhaps fill the space – but we worked all day during the week so we knew it wouldn't be fair on the dog. So we started looking at other options:

Birds – rather noisy and I didn't like the idea of feathered creatures in cages.

Hamsters, mice, degus etc – not interactive enough, we both wanted to play with our would-be companion.

Rabbits – in the US there is a trend to keep these indoors and they seem quite fun, however, after looking after a friend's rabbit for a week, I realised that they set my allergies off so badly that after only a short amount of time, I wheezed terribly.

Cats – much the same as rabbits in the allergy dept, except with addition of horrific itchy welts on my face.

Guinea pigs – seemed a bit dim.

So what were we left with?.....ferrets!

Being an Internet freak (it's my job), and after surfing quite a lot, I came to realise that ferrets were big in America, in fact the third most popular pet. My initial thought about ferrets was why are people keeping these smelly, bitey creatures?...but boy they do look cute. So I started a mission to find out as much as possible about them. I surfed the Net which is a veritable encyclopaedia of information, read bulletin boards and bought the recommended US books on ferrets.

However, as a child I had come across the odd book in the library about ferret keeping in England. They mostly seemed to be kept by country folk for keeping the population of rabbits down and kept outside in hutches. However, even 10 years ago, the picture of a ferret was quite endearing.

Going by criteria based on information in the new books on closer inspection they did seem to fill many, many of our criteria. According to the books, they were clean,

action packed balls of fun, they slept for the most part of the day when we'd be at work ready for playtime when we got home and you could even take them on walks on a leash.

I did have my preconceptions about ferrets and these were the major drawbacks in being very careful about deciding whether or not ferrets were for us. There were also other questions to be asked:

1. Would I be allergic to them – I had been slightly allergic to the rats and as much as possible I didn't want to be allergic to a new pet.
2. Don't ferrets stink? They seem in the US not to be bothered about the ferret smell. Not ever having seen a 'live' one, I had no notion as to what a ferret smells like.
3. Don't they poo a lot?
4. What is the best diet for a ferret? I had previously thought that I would have to feed them animal carcasses, now for someone who's basically a vegetarian that's disturbing. But in the US you could feed them kibble.
5. Do they bond with people?

After all the reading I had done (mostly from American books), I had built up a wonderfully sanitised picture of these beautiful furry snakes, playing in our house dutifully trotting off to their litter pans when ever they had a call of nature. As well as a romantic image of setting off on a summers stroll in the evening with my ferret on a leash.

So it was time now to find out what ferrets are like in real life in the UK.

Investigations into live ferrets

By looking for information about ferrets, I had found that you could also get commercial dry kibble for ferrets here in the UK and by looking around large pet stores, we found a local one had a few ferret supplies. Still I needed to see the creatures in the flesh, so to speak.

I had also found a local ferret welfare, but before I knew whether I'd be allergic to them I didn't want to bother them. I decided that a trip down to the local RSPCA rehoming centre would be the ideal place to see ferrets and not to feel like I'd have to rehome one immediately.

My husband Tony, and I turned up at the local RSPCA not knowing what we'd find. We strolled around aimlessly looking at cats and dogs wondering where the small animal house was. We decided to follow the people in front of us who seemed to know where they were going. They led us into an area where there were mesh and wood runs for rabbits and we walked into the small animal house. There was lot of hamsters and mice and squarking birds, but no ferrets. We then walked through another door and yes by the smell we'd found the ferret room. It was quite strong

and powerful....and the ferrets weren't actually in their stainless steel cages. We walked out through another door to the outside once again and found the ferrets enjoying fresh air in outdoor pens. There were two albino jills, one sable hob and a ginger looking hob. This was the closest we'd ever been to ferrets! We asked the assistant if we could hold a ferret. The only sure fire way of know whether I'd be allergic was to immerse myself in ferret. The man chose the "less bitey ferret" which was the sable whole hob. This didn't help my illusion of ferrets as being smelly and vicious. He held him out for me and I held him close. He was lovely with big brown eyes saying 'take me home' and 'I want to play'. (Not that I knew that at the time). I put him back determined not to make any rash decisions, although he was undeniably cute. He was quite strong smelling and I wiped the ferret musk over my arms and across my face to see if I would react.

I walked back to car ready to see if I was about to swell up into an itchy reaction. Whilst driving back in the enclosed space of my car, I started to sniff the air. What was that really strong odour that I could smell....oh my God....it was me. Or rather it was the ferret musk. It wouldn't wipe off with a wet wipe and once home found that only soap and water did the trick. But hallelujah....no reaction. This looked promising allergy wise, but they did seem to smell a bit strong. However, we had been reassured that castration would reduce the smell considerably.

We also still didn't know how keep ferrets – what would make the best cage for them and what they are like in a home environment?

A friend of ours had a connection with a lady who kept ferrets and who also had a polecat breeding and re-introduction programme. So she arranged a time for us to go and see her. She was absolutely fascinating. She was completely into her ferrets with several pens in the garden. She showed us her pet ferrets and also a genuine polecat which was part of the breeding programme. We learnt a lot about ferret character in a home/garden environment from her. She did offer us a humungus year old ferret hob to home. However, her husband put him away with a pair of gloves on which again didn't help the bitey ferret illusion. We were told that it was a precaution as it was the mating season and being a whole hob with the smell of jills around, he might get a bit aggressive. Not knowing enough about ferrets we didn't know what to think – the idea of ferrets biting seemed to be recurring one. However, after this visit, both me and my husband were feeling more confident about ferrets generally. However, we still needed to know more – we were still a bit unsure about the biting.

We then arranged a time to visit the local ferret welfare. The man who ran it from his back garden, was very welcoming and had a beautiful large shed/ferret home which had about 25 ferrets all running around and playing. It was lovely to see all these ferrets really enjoying themselves and having a great time. He was a great ferret ambassador and answered all our questions and I smelt what a castrated hob smells like – much more pleasant. He told us that well acclimatised ferrets won't bite and showed us how to discourage it and that none of his ferrets would bite by repeated sticking his fingers near their mouths. True, he still had all ten fingers.

After this visit we were hooked – we said we'd be back in a few months time after Tony had made a home for the ferrets in the garden. We decided they would have much more fun living outdoors as the cage could be so much bigger, plus they do have a distinctive ferrety smell which we weren't sure we were ready for in the house.

I had heard that a friend's friend, Val, had also become upset by the short lives of rats and had decided to keep ferrets instead. It seemed like a trip to visit her should be in order. By now there was only one big question on our minds about ferrets – could they really be litter trained and how much poo does a ferret do?

We arranged to see Val and her ferrets one evening. Her husband is a builder/decorator had built a ferret palace in the garden. It was an extremely large custom made shed with shelves, toys, tubes, the works all for two little ferret boys. Val took them out on their leashes and we both quizzed her. She'd got her ferrets at 8 weeks old and they were brothers, however, one of them was nippy and she couldn't stop him doing it. They were real lookers (if you can say that of ferrets). They were really playful and Val showed us that her two pooped consistently in two washing up bowls in their home.

So it seemed from what we could find out about ferrets that they were clean, could be litter trained, be fed kibble, be playful, didn't smell too much and looked really cute. Well, that confirmed it, we were going to keep ferrets.

I had drawn up some plans for a ferret court which I had Val's husband give the once over. We were going to build on our patio an 8 foot by 3 foot by 4 foot ferret home, which had an entrance into a brick shed for shelter from rain and the weather when it got really cold. This was a ferret mansion, rather than a palace.

I was surprised to find out how much all the timber, screws, mesh etc added up to and Tony's time! By doing a bit at a time at the weekends, it took about 3 months before it was complete. But with credit to Tony, it looked magnificent.

The Finding of Furry Inhabitants

Well now the cage was complete and my husband had imaginatively added hammocks, tubes, shelves, a sleeping box etc I felt an incredibly urge to rush out and find some inhabitants. But saying that, I still wanted to make sure I got the 'right' ones. From my experiences with rats, I know that I wanted healthy individuals if they were going to fulfil all their 11 years lifespan. The books all said to look for ferrets a couple of years old as they wouldn't be so frisky and nippy. A friend had also said "there'll always be ferrets to home, so don't take any home that don't feel completely right". Good words of wisdom. We decided we want a pair to home.

We arranged one weekend to visit the local ferret welfare man again. However, this time he said he didn't have many ferrets to rehome. When we visited, all he had was two sable jills, and one albino hob, all about 2 years old. At that time I was rather bothered by pink eyes and didn't really want to home the albino, although my husband was happy enough about it. He showed us the girls, they looked very pretty, but one was very uninterested in her surroundings, and didn't even move even when held. Although, I was reassured that they were all healthy, I just didn't get a good feeling from her, so we declined his offer (which I think offended him) and left empty handed; my friends words resounding in my head.

We were disappointed. So the next week we started phoning around other relatively local ferret welfares, the addresses of which I was able to find through the Internet. We phoned about 6, but all had no ferrets to rehome. We were quite surprised. Finally, the very last one, the Essex Ferret Welfare had ferrets and we made an appointment to visit.

We turned up at our appointed time, the door opened and the lady expectantly looked at us – we looked at each other. We then explained that we had spoken to a man (which turned out to be her teenage son) to arrange for us to see her ferrets. We found out that our message hadn't been passed on, but she welcomed us warmly in anyway which we were very relieved at. The house was a melee of building works and dogs and the lady was obviously very dedicated to rehoming not just ferrets, but rabbits and guinea pigs, whilst also looking after her family and several dogs. My hat comes off to her.

She did warn/explain that she felt ferrets thrived better on a more natural diet of meat after which she showed us to a shed at the end of the garden where the ferrets were housed. The ferret's dinner of a pile of dead pigeons was stacked in a pile which had to be stepped over to enter into the shed. She obviously wasn't really expecting visitors. Living a rather sanitised life in a city and being a vegetarian, I did find it off putting.

There were hutches either side of a passage leading to a large pen at the end. It was a wonderful sight to behold. In this pen, was about 30 or more wriggling, playing, leaping, rolling happy, happy ferrets. It was a joy to see these ferrets having such a fun time.

On Choosing Ferrets

She left us by ourselves to choose the ferrets we wanted – prompted only by 'please take a white one'. There was quite a lot of white ones which were harder to home as they weren't so popular as the coloured ones. Hubby didn't have a problem with pink eyes and we started to feel sorry for the white ferrets that couldn't get homes. So hubby chose a great big white ball of sappy fur. I don't know quite how he chose that particular one, but he did.

I kept picking up different ones – they all clamoured to be picked up and played with, to see if they were different. There were slight differences – some were a bit nippy, others squiggled more – there was an X factor about them all. However, repeatedly one sable girl kept being picked up. I would put a ferret down to pick another one up, and it would somehow be the same one again and again. Well, she obviously wanted to come home and she wasn't nippy and wasn't too wriggly. Whilst we left the ferret shed for a while she even learnt how to climb out to escape to me – so that was it – ferrets chosen. In fact, it's probably more accurate to say that the ferrets chose us, rather than vice versa.

Bringing the ferrets home

Now as you may remember, I had this sanitised view of ferrets as being very clean – they're house pets in the US remember. Once we returned home, we introduced the two ferrets into their mansion, which they seemed very pleased to own. Unfortunately, we also had to give them their dinner – 6 dead day old chicks – this is what they had been used to eating. At which point they decided that it was fun to have a tug of war over one of them, regardless that there was five others. So now we have this scene of your lovely pet ripping to shreds these carcasses with bits of dead flesh scattered everywhere. We left them till the morning to settle in.

In the morning, it was at this point that I almost just drove them straight back to where we'd got them from. First of all I noticed the smell, even though they were outside they smelt horrible, in their bed box was little scraps of chick which of course lent itself to the overall pervading odour and then I noticed.....poo everywhere.

We had put a litter tray in the corner further from their bed which they should poo in according to all the books. WRONG. They had pooped all along the back length of their home. Poo and urine everywhere, and of course our clean little pets were walking through it all. So then we opened the door to their home. Now these little creatures are fast we found out and wanted to escape in their excitement anywhere. My husband had to make a few adjustments to their cage in order that they wouldn't escape every time we opened the door. I felt bad for him as he had spent many weeks of his spare time making the ferret home and there seemed to be no end to it. I felt it was all my fault and it was all very smelly and very messy and we had this for the next 11 years. Tony is a real trouper and just took it all in his stride, but I had to go for a very long walk by myself just to make some sense of it all. It's strange how you can do all the research you can, want these creatures for years, wait for at least 6 months before the time is right and then feel you've made the worst decision in the world.

Training Ferrets

Well, I felt a bit embarrassed to take the ferrets back after only a day, so I decided just to see how it went. Tony was struck by the little creatures and had no ideas of

giving them back – in fact he wanted more. This is where all the books I'd read and all the Internet discussion lists came in useful. Over the last four weeks or so of keeping them, gradually, step by step, by us being more persistent and more ingenious than the ferrets, we managed to get them to go in the litter corner with a hit rate of about 90%. In their cage they don't like the idea of a lip to step over to get into the litter tray, however, I'm just pleased that it's mostly in one corner and can be scooped. I suppose it took me about 2 weeks to get used to them – they aren't the scary, smelly creatures that I first thought they were. We have sanitised them as much as is possible.

They are now fed on ferret kibble and twice a week have a meal of cooked chicken mince or cubes – human quality. This cuts down on their smell immensely and stops bits of raw flesh sticking to everything. It also makes their poo firmer and less smelly too. As they are relatively litter trained it means that picking them up and playing with them isn't disgusting. They come into the house to play most evenings. They also have a small pen indoors with a litter tray in which they do poo quite consistently in. We are still working on house training them, but most the time they go in the same two corners, so if they do miss the litter tray, we can roll the newspaper up beneath it and throw it away.

Ferrets do make endearing play mates. They're playful, fast, quick and full of energy. We've named the sable girl, Willow and the albino male, Merlin. Merlin is a real softy who likes his tummy tickled and licks you. Willow is a cutey who wants to play. They aren't mean or bitey at all. You might accidentally get a nip whilst playing with them, but it doesn't hurt.

Ferrets are great pets, but quite high maintenance. Before getting any, I would recommend you read as much as you can and make sure you can give them the time they need.

Epilogue

Well, that was quite a few years ago now. We've unfortunately never had one of our ferrets reach 11 years old, but we still have Willow who's an old lady at 8.5 years old now. We've had our fair share of ups and downs, and been owners of quite a few ferrets – many of which have now passed on.

We have learnt so much about ferrets, how best to feed them, care, ailments, nursing, we're terrible at introductions we've found out, but most of all the thing about ferrets is that they bring JOY into our lives.