



Domestic Ferret

Kingdom: Animalia
 Phylum: Chordata
 Subphylum: Vertebrata
 Class: Mammalia
 Order: Carnivora
 Family: Mustelidae
 Genus: *Mustela*
 Species: *putorius furo*



Photo courtesy of Karen Marzynski

Habitat

- **In the Wild:** This is a totally domesticated animal that cannot and does not exist in the wild. This species is a distant cousin to the wild, black-footed ferret and the European polecat. Domesticated ferrets are found all over the world except on the continent of Antarctica.
- **Exhibit Location:** Zoo to You Collection

Characteristics

- Domestic ferrets are in the same family as weasels, otters, skunks, ermines, badgers, fishers, and mink. They are not rodents.
- Ferrets have a musky scent about them. Getting them spayed or neutered will decrease the smell. They also have scent sacs like skunks do, and these are often removed by pet owners to decrease the spraying that they can do when excited or afraid.
- The most common color is the sable (as in the picture above). Other colors are chocolate, cinnamon, silver, and albino. Ferrets have heavy coats in winter and lighter ones in summer. Many lighten in color as they age.
- Ferrets cannot tolerate high temperatures and are at risk of heat stroke at temperatures of 85 degrees F or higher. This is because they cannot sweat or cool themselves down naturally.
- Males weigh between 2-4 pounds; females $\frac{3}{4}$ -2 pounds. Adult size is reached at about 6 months of age. Their bodies are extremely flexible. They have excellent senses of smell, touch (whiskers), and hearing. They have sharp claws for digging and hanging onto things.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** not found in the wild; **In Captivity** 3-5 years

Behaviors

- If a ferret has not been de-scented and becomes very excited or afraid, they can release a short burst of scent. However, this odor goes away quickly.
- Ferrets can be litter box trained. They use corners for toilets. They are about 70% compliant with litter box use. They can “forget” to use their litter boxes if excited or confused.
- Ferrets groom themselves like cats. They also have thick skin that protects them from strong play-bites by other ferrets. Ferret play involves mock combat. They bite and drag each other around, but this usually doesn’t hurt.
- Ferrets are very curious by nature and can get into small spaces to investigate. Homes need to be “ferret proofed” and they should never be left alone in an unprotected room. They love to steal small (and not so small) objects and stash them under chairs and behind furniture.
- Ferrets sleep about 16 hours a day, but readily adapt to their owner’s schedule. They will play hard 30 minutes -5 hours a day, depending on their age (day or night doesn’t matter). They often stop suddenly to scratch or to plop down flat on the floor, only to jump up and return to their active pace. Happy ferrets do a “dance” whereby they hop on all fours back and forth with the back arched, head up, and mouth open. This is often an invitation to play with them.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** ferret balls and other toys, ferret tunnels, scents, sounds, daily human contact, rides in a shoe box or on a sheet or blanket dragged across the floor (a real favorite), old shoes, old sweatshirt for burrowing, hammocks, stuffed sock, Ferretone (liquid supplement)

Reproduction

- Sexual maturity is reached at 4-6 months of age. If not spayed or neutered, males and females have a strong odor while in heat. Males can be very aggressive during the mating season to the point of injuring or even killing other ferrets. Females (unless spayed), who don't breed every year, develop aplastic anemia and will die.
- The gestation period is 38-44 days. The young are born hairless, blind, and deaf. They are weaned at 8 weeks of age.
- First time mothers will not often take care of the kits, and another nursing mother needs to be willing to take over the care.
- Breeding by a regular pet owner is difficult and is not recommended. Breeding should only be done by experienced breeders.
- Hob = intact male, jill = intact female, gib = neutered male, sprite = spayed female, kit = baby, business = group of ferrets

Diet

- **In the Wild:** not applicable (do not and cannot live in the wild)
- **At the Zoo:** dried meat-based ferret food

Conservation Status

- The domestic ferret is very common. Some places consider ferrets a wild animal, a rabies threat, and a potential problem of forming feral packs if let loose. These beliefs are all unfounded. These places ban ferrets and make having one illegal. Other places require a license or permit. Still other places have no restrictions on having them as pets.
- Ferrets are banned in California and Hawaii. This is also true in other cities scattered across the United States. Anyone wishing to have a ferret as a pet should check with the local authorities.

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- The origin of the domestic ferret is Europe or Africa. It was first domesticated over 3000 years ago, although there are said to be pictures of ferrets helping people in Egypt from around 4000 B.C. Ferrets were first brought to the United States about 300 years ago.
- Ferrets are used by electricians to run wires and cables through tubes and other small areas that are inaccessible to humans.
- Ferrets are best trained by rewards. They bond to their owners and will suffer emotionally if the owner tires of them and abandons them after a year or two.
- They need to be vaccinated for both canine distemper and rabies every year.

Sources:

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- Knudson, S. (n.d.). What is a ferret?. Retrieved Oct. 22, 2005, from West Valley Wuzzles! Web site: <http://www.wuzzles.com/ferrets/documents/whatisaferretf.htm>.
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