

## PROJECT IDEA STARTER

# Ferrets

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Ferrets, *Mustela putorius furo*, are small mammals belonging to the scientific order Carnivora. The ferret is one of 67 species in the family Mustelidae. This family includes weasels, minks, ermines, otters, badgers, skunks, and sables. The Egyptians first domesticated ferrets around 3000 B.C. to control rodents and to keep as pets. A man called a “ferretmeister” would release his ferrets at a farm or granary. The ferrets would go into the rats’ holes and hiding places and “ferret” out the rats. Ferrets’ odor in the tunnels would cause fear in the rats. Over time, ferrets have served many other purposes. Their fur, called “fitch,” has been used in clothing. Camel hair brushes (invented by a person named Camel) are made from ferret tail fur.

Unneutered male ferrets are called “hobs,” and unsplayed female ferrets are called “jills.” Neutered males are called “gibs,” and spayed females are called “sprites.” A “kit” is a young ferret under four months of age. A group of ferrets is called “a business.” Adults can weigh 3–7 pounds, and can reach lengths of 18 inches, not including the tail. Adult hobs can grow to about twice the size of jills. Ferrets are considered fully grown at seven months, and their average life span is five to eight years.

Before purchasing your ferret, contact your local animal control officer or public health agency to learn whether your county and local laws allow ferrets. If you can own a ferret, the next step is to find a reputable breeder. Many health and behavioral problems can be avoided by finding a trusted source.

When purchasing a ferret, make arrangements to have it spayed or neutered, if it isn’t already. Females are spayed to eliminate the prolonged heat cycle (several months) and development of a condition known as aplastic anemia. Males are neutered to prevent the development of aggressive behavior.

Take care in choosing a pet that is a good fit for you. Share with your breeder your experience level with pets, and be sure to interact with several ferrets. Usually one or two will stand out as a good match for you.

Young ferrets should have their first distemper shot by 6 weeks of age, their second shot at 8 weeks, their third shot at 10 weeks, and their fourth shot at 12 weeks. They should receive their first

## PLAN YOUR PROJECT

Use this idea starter AND publication 4-H 365 *Self-Determined Project Guide* as the starting place for your 4-H self-determined project. The *Self-Determined Project Guide* is available from your county OSU Extension office or on the Web at [ohio4h.org/selfdetermined](http://ohio4h.org/selfdetermined). You may choose to do a little or a lot depending on your level of interest. Be sure to register your project with your county OSU Extension office.

distemper booster when they are 6 months old, and annually thereafter. Check with your state's department of health for rabies vaccination requirements.

Ferrets can turn their heads 180 degrees, using this ability when they get into tight places. They have only one central artery in the neck, allowing continued blood flow to the brain when their head is rotated. Ferrets communicate by making several kinds of noises. They will make a noise that sounds like "dook." This can mean they are happy, excited, or angry, depending on the situation. Sometimes they will hiss when they are afraid. If a ferret has been hurt (for example, when stepped on) or is terrified, it will scream. As you become familiar with the behavior of your ferret, you will learn what its body language and sounds are telling you.

Ferrets are very curious, social, and affectionate animals. They require human interaction. They are playful and highly intelligent. A single ferret can become bored and lonely. If no one is at home much of the time, you might want to consider getting two ferrets. Even if you purchase two ferrets, you still must handle them daily and offer them playtime. Ferret-proof one room in the house, and give your ferret daily exercise. When your pet is first turned loose in its playroom, it will spend time snooping in every nook and cranny. Once its curiosity is satisfied, it will be ready to play. As your pet becomes accustomed to its surroundings, it will snoop less and be ready to play sooner. Ferrets are very active, so you must block off areas around refrigerators and other appliances

so your ferret cannot get into motors or vents. Early on, your ferret must be litter-trained and taught to respect humans.

When you first bring your ferret home, introduce it to its cage and give it time to explore. Keep other pets away from your ferret. When your ferret wakes from sleeping, give it time to use its litter box and eat before handling. Quietly talk to your pet before picking it up. Ferrets should be handled by placing your thumb and index finger around the ferret's neck. Grasp the front legs with the other fingers to support the chest. Use your other hand to hold and support the rear legs. You might also want to carry your ferret this way. Never pick up a ferret by the tail. Care should be used with strange ferrets, as they are likely to nip.



The best way to handle a ferret.

Until you train it not to, your ferret might try to bite you when you pick it up. If it tries to bite you, sternly tell it "no!" If it does this a second time, you might have to temporarily immobilize your ferret by scruffing it (grasping the loose

skin behind the head and neck, then lifting it while supporting its hind quarters) while sternly telling it "no!" Do not tap or flick your ferret on the nose or shake or hit your ferret in any way. This could cause your ferret to become either fearful or more aggressive. You might have to repeat this until your ferret understands not to bite you. As you and your ferret become familiar with each other, your ferret might play-bite during play, but it will quit as soon as you tell it "no!"



The proper way to scruff a ferret.

You should train your ferret to walk on a leash. Do not use a collar for leash-training, as a ferret can easily slip out of the collar. Use a harness made for ferrets (or cats), and attach the leash. The object of leash-training is to get the ferret to wander around without fighting, biting, or playing with the leash. A ferret's play is similar to that of kittens. Ferrets use their paws to bat at each other or at you. They jump, bounce, and hop toward you, enticing you to play. Ferrets will display a fear gesture by puffing. They arch their backs,

raise all the hair on their body and tail, and sit on all four feet. If a ferret runs backward as you try to pick it up, it is telling you that it doesn't want to be handled or that it is afraid of you. A ferret will commonly grab your hand or finger with its teeth and hold on. It is trying to show dominance when doing this. You must not allow it to bite this way, so you should sternly tell it "no!" Gentle play-biting, however, is normal.

Ferrets can squeeze through very tiny gaps, so their cages must be escape-proof. You might even need to add your own locks. If you have two ferrets, the cage needs to be large enough to accommodate both animals. A cage for one ferret should be at least 24 inches long, 18 inches wide, and 18 inches high. A commercially built multilevel wire cage is ideal. It should have solid flooring with either a slide-out litter tray or a base that detaches from the top of the cage for easy cleaning. If you have a cage with a wire mesh floor, put a piece of a washable pet rug over part of it to protect the ferret's sensitive feet pads. The ideal cage should have equipment such as a ramp, ladder, hammock, soft tunnels, and hanging tubes. Wooden structures do not make good cages. Wood absorbs odors, so no matter how often it is cleaned, it will eventually have a residual smell. Aquariums also do not make good cages. The solid sides do not allow for adequate ventilation. Keep the room temperature below 80 degrees Fahrenheit. Ferrets can easily suffer from heat stroke and heat exhaustion. Keep the cage away from direct sunlight and heating elements.



A well-equipped ferret cage.

Most ferrets will drink from a gravity-flow water bottle. This can be hung on the outside of the cage with the sipper tube pointing through the wire. Some ferrets might choose not to drink from the water bottle. If not, use a weighted bowl or crock. You will also need a weighted bowl or crock for your ferret's food. Use old cotton rags, tightly woven blankets, and T-shirts for bedding. These can be easily washed. Do not use towels, as a ferret might get its toenails caught in the material. Toys suitable for cats are fine for ferrets. Ferrets are not usually destructive chewers, but soft rubber toys that can easily be chewed and ingested should not be used.

Litter-training your ferret can be a challenge, if you have purchased a ferret that is not already trained. Your ferret might decide the litter pan is a place to sleep, burrow in, or play in. You need to convince your ferret differently. The litter pan can be a cat litter pan, a plastic dish pan, or a plastic storage container. The sides should be 4 inches high. Do not use loose clay or clumping cat

litter. It is too dusty for ferrets and sticks to their fur, which can be fatal. The ideal type of litter for ferrets is a pelleted litter made of materials such as recycled paper, reconstituted and compressed wood, or alfalfa pellets. Be aware that corn cob litters can cause intestinal blockage in ferrets. Also, do not use wood chips.

Ferrets retreat to corners to use the bathroom. A ferret will hike up its rear end, back into the spot it has chosen, and do its business. Ferrets have a fast metabolism and might use the bathroom every two to three hours. They use it almost immediately when they wake, and within two to three hours after eating. Set the litter pan in a corner of the cage away from the ferret's sleeping and eating areas. Fill the other three corners with a food dish, a water bottle, and blankets. Use a nontoxic, antibacterial cleanser to clean the cage. A ferret's respiratory system can be damaged if you use ammonia or chlorine bleach to clean its cage.

Being carnivorous, ferrets require foods made from animal protein and fats. Ferrets have a very active metabolism. Commercially prepared ferret foods do not guarantee that you are feeding your ferret the correct nutrition. You must read the nutritional analysis and ingredients when buying commercially prepared food. This food should contain a minimum of 36 percent protein and 22 percent fat, and a maximum of 2 percent fiber. The protein sources must come mainly from animal protein, such as chicken, to enable your ferret to digest its food properly. When reading the ingredients on the

package, make sure that the first two ingredients listed are animal protein. Ferrets do not digest fiber well. Feeding foods higher than two percent fiber, or giving fruits and vegetables as snacks, can cause your pet's stool to be large and smelly. Ferrets enjoy treats. Treats such as whole-grain sugarless cereal or raisins make good snacks. Do not feed your ferret milk or dairy products. Milk will give your pet diarrhea. Do not feed your ferret chocolate, any type of candy, or any other sugary foods. Do not give your ferret bones, such as chicken bones, since they can choke on them.

Ferrets are free feeders and should be provided with food 24 hours a day. Ferrets are seldom overweight if given enough exercise. If they become overweight, increase their exercise, but do not decrease their food. Everything a ferret eats passes through its system in two to three hours (or one hour for a young kit). A hungry kit will bite.

The body temperature of a ferret is 101.9 degrees Fahrenheit. The normal respiration rate for a ferret is 30–40 breaths per minute. A normal heart rate is 220–250 beats per minute. It is important to have your ferret examined by a veterinarian once a year. Your ferret must be kept current on its vaccinations, including canine distemper and rabies. If your ferret goes outside, it should be on heartworm prevention. Your veterinarian should perform routine blood work on your ferret yearly. Ferrets are susceptible to disease, so planned visits to the veterinarian are important. The most common ferret diseases are rabies, distemper,



A young ferret, or a “kit.”

heartworm, pneumonia, intestinal blockage, hairball, insulinoma, lymphosarcoma, and epizootic catarrhal enteritis.

Proper grooming helps reduce ferret odors and keeps your pet healthy. Keeping litter boxes and bedding clean keeps odors to a minimum, too. Make sure these are not the source of your ferret's odor. Do not bathe your ferret more than once every two to three months. Frequent bathing causes dry skin, which causes an overproduction of skin oils, which causes increased odor. If your pet is not afraid of water, you can fill a sink or bathtub with about 2 inches of warm water to bathe it. Keep the water shallow enough so that your ferret can touch the bottom. Another method of bathing is to hold your ferret during this process. Whatever your approach, first wet the ferret thoroughly with warm water. Use a shampoo made for kittens or ferrets, then use a conditioner to help return moisture to the skin. Thoroughly rinse the ferret, making sure there are no traces of soap in its fur. Dry your ferret with a towel, keeping it in a draft-free,

warm place until it is completely dry. Dry shampoos are also a good option. Ferrets shed their coat twice a year. Brush your ferret with a soft bristle brush weekly or more often as needed. During their periods of shedding, you might need to brush them daily.

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### **AREAS OF INTEREST AND THINGS TO DO**

Every self-determined 4-H project can be broken down into areas of interest. These are the specific things members want to address during their project adventures. Using *4-H 365 Self-Determined Project Guide*, identify at least three areas of interest with at least three activities per area to explore. Take your ideas from the list below or make up your own.

#### **Selection**

- ☐ Research pet laws in your state to make sure ferrets are legal as pets.
- ☐ Create a budget of expenses that you will potentially incur as a ferret owner. Research the cost of the ferret and its housing supplies, feed, and healthcare.

- ❑ Make a list of reputable breeders or pet stores that have ferrets.
- ❑ Look at several ferrets to see if you can correctly identify males versus females.
- ❑ Determine if you will select a young or a mature ferret. Create a list of pros and cons for each age.
- ❑ Learn the signs of an unhealthy ferret and make a list of them. Look for indications while selecting your ferret.

### Proper Habitat

- ❑ Investigate and purchase housing for your ferret.
- ❑ Create a list of other items to add to the housing. Research what items are needed for a happy ferret.
- ❑ Purchase the appropriate items for feeding. Know the signs of your ferret when it's not eating or drinking properly. Research alternative methods of feeding and watering.
- ❑ Learn about providing litter materials for your pet. What is the best? How much should you have in the pan? Is it readily available in your area?
- ❑ Research the safest cleaning product options for your pet, then purchase them and create a schedule for cleaning.
- ❑ Explore the ideal environment for your ferret. List how you will achieve these conditions.
- ❑ Design an appropriate exercise space for your ferret. Create a poster or take pictures of the space. Then, list the obstacles

that could endanger your ferret and how you will avoid them.

### Nutrition

- ❑ Research the types of foods ferrets need for a balanced diet. Not all commercial diets are ideal, so it is best to gather information from a reputable source for nutritional information.
- ❑ Look into any dietary requirements that may change as your ferret ages.
- ❑ Create a feeding schedule and keep it near your pet's cage. Make room on your chart for any change in the amount of food you give it.
- ❑ Track your ferret's weight weekly to see if it stays the same or changes.
- ❑ Experiment with different "treats" for your ferret. Document your pet's preferences of treats and how the treats affect its mood.

### Handling and Grooming

- ❑ Research how to properly handle a ferret so you and your pet enjoy your encounters.
- ❑ Keep a journal about how you bond with your new ferret. Describe activities in which you both take part, and describe your pet's attitude about its new surroundings. Start a timeline to document important events.
- ❑ Create a display describing the signs of a relaxed or frightened ferret. Use pictures or drawings to provide visual cues.

- ❑ Explore when and how often ferrets need to be groomed and bathed. Describe possible issues that might arise while bathing. Describe your experience of bathing your ferret, if applicable.

### Health Care

- ❑ Document the medical records for your ferret. List visits to the veterinarian, diseases, treatments, and concerns about your ferret's health.
- ❑ Make a list of common diseases that typically affect ferrets. Also list their symptoms. Include internal as well as external diseases.
- ❑ Learn the external parts of your ferret. This will help you communicate with a veterinarian or someone else when you discuss your pet.
- ❑ Document some of the signs of an unhealthy ferret so you can be on the alert in case you see any deviation from the norm for your pet.

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### SOURCE

Miller, Lucinda, and William Stanforth. *Small Animals Resource Handbook*. The Ohio State University, 2005.

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### RELATED RESOURCES

eXtension. *Heartworm Disease*. [articles.extension.org/pages/73456/heartworm-disease](http://articles.extension.org/pages/73456/heartworm-disease).  
Heart of Ohio Ferret Association and Rescue, Inc. [hofarescue.org](http://hofarescue.org).

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[ohio4h.org/selfdetermined](http://ohio4h.org/selfdetermined)



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