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Why ferrets are worth the trouble

A ferret peeks out from under a blanket inside Robin Hochgertel's Ferrets First rescue in Annandale, Va.

(Jacquelyn Martin/AP)

By Linda Lombardi
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Poor ferrets -- all those terrible rumors go round about them: they smell, they bite, they're mean and nasty. They're even illegal to own in some places.

But Robin Hochgertel knows the real secret: "People who get ferrets have a tendency to become ferret addicts."

Hochgertel, who runs the Ferrets First rescue in Annandale, Va., says that ferrets are actually sweet and cuddly, and most of all, entertaining to watch. "They'll get in your lap, but they won't you let them hold them for very long. They always have something to see and something to do," she says.

Ferrets are smart enough to learn their names, and they bond to individual people. "They're so expressive -- when you talk to them, they look right at you," says Lisa Vible of Elkton, Md., education director for the American Ferret Association. Vible should know: She currently has 18 of them.

But if you're considering a ferret, remember that those charming

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characteristics come at a price. Being intelligent, curious, and busy, ferrets have a lot of chances to get into trouble. "They're perpetual 2-year-olds," says Vible. "They're always into something."

So you'll need to ferret-proof your house from the point of view of a clever, long, skinny 2-year-old. "If their heads make it out, their bodies make it out," says Hochgertel, who recommends lying down on the floor to look for openings that would let them get behind or into cabinets and furniture, as well as unexpected ways out of a room or house.

And a social animal like a ferret needs company and attention. You should be prepared to let them out of their cages for several hours a day to exercise and socialize. They also enjoy rough play with one another such as chasing and wrestling that their human friends can't really provide. So although you probably don't want to start with 18 eighteen, you should consider getting more than one.

"One is a lot to take care of, because it requires your complete attention. If you have two, they play toegether," says Hochgertel.

But even if your ferret has company, it's still a high maintenance pet, more comparable to a dog than to most small caged animals. And like dogs or cats, they need regular vet care, which can be expensive. You'll need to find a specialist vet, who might not be nearby, and be prepared for possible major illnesses, including adrenal gland disease, which is common in these animals.

If you're prepared for all that, though, you're probably still wondering: what's this about the smell?

Hochgertel and Vible both say that the ferret's reputation for stinkiness is much exaggerated. Any animal has a characteristic body odor, but as with any other animal, proper care will minimize it. Hochgertel recommends the following steps in particular:

-- Keep the cage clean. A ferret's cage should be lined with blankets and contain a litter box (don't use clay litter, she says, which gets stuck in their noses if they root in it). Launder the blankets at least once a week and scoop the litter every day.

-- While regular cleaning of your ferret's litter box is obviously crucial, it's also important to start with a good diet. Some major commercial ferret diets are based on fish; avoiding these will result in a much less smelly output.

-- Clean their outer ears regularly with a cotton swab. Ferrets also need regular nail trims, but Hochgertel says not to bathe them too frequently, which will actually increase odor by making their skin glands work overtime.

-- Especially for a first time ferret owner, try to get your new pet from a rescue. A rescue, with its in-depth experience, will give you a better

education on the care of your ferret than a pet store can. And a rescue will make sure you're a good match with your ferret, because they do have different personalities.

Ferret addicts say their pets are indeed a big commitment, but well worth it.

"You're getting an animal that needs a lot of time to roam and play and be themselves. And they require a lot of vet care," says Vible. "I love them so much, so for me it's not a lot of work -- but it is a lot of work."

Ferret laws can confound

Ferrets, like most other less conventional pets, may be subject to a range of laws regulating the ownership of exotic animals. Although it's legal to keep ferrets in most places, there are a few exceptions, such as New York City and California.

But David Gaines, director of the legislative and legal affairs committee for the American Ferret Association, says in recent years most places have made the pets legal.

"Minneapolis and Dallas have recently legalized them," he says. "I'm not aware of any major municipalities that have gone in the other direction."

Ferrets, members of the weasel family, have been domesticated for thousands of years. In the past, advocates had to convince legislators that ferrets shouldn't be regulated as wild animals, but "now it's more or less acknowledged," he says.

But animals are subject to a patchwork of laws at more local levels that which may not always be consistent with one another. For example, ferrets are legal in Salt Lake County, but that's overridden by a law that prohibits them in Salt Lake City. So you need to check carefully before acquiring a ferret, or before moving if you have one.

And don't assume that ferrets are legal in your area just because you see ferret food for sale in your local pet store. Gaines notes, "The ferret aisles in pet stores are getting bigger and bigger -- even in California."

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