

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
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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.)

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.

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.

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 sea otter. 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.



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.



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 fuzzibutt. I know that many more terms of endearment exist out there. Don't get confused!

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



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 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.

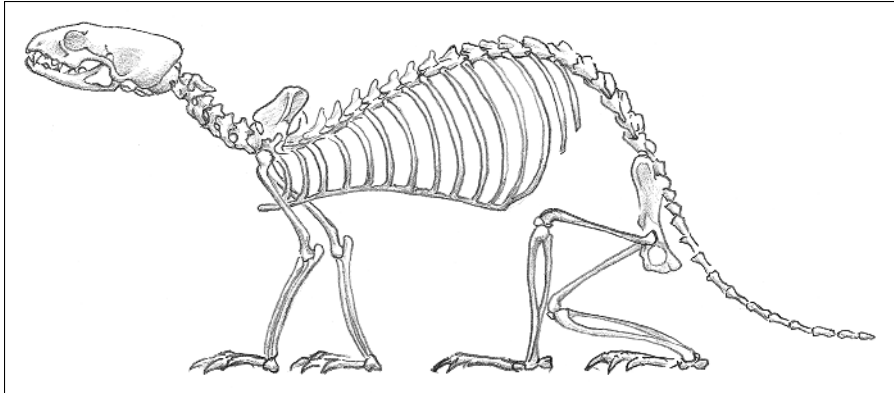
Take a look at Figure 1-2 if you really want to get down to the bones, literally, of examining a ferret's physical makeup! For information on ferret coats and colors, see Chapter 2.

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

The average life span of a well-cared-for ferret is between 6 to 8 years, but I've heard many stories of ferrets that have lived for up to 9 or 10 years, barring any unforeseen mishaps. My belief is that a ferret's environment — his caging, disease, stress, diet, and so on — plays a role in his short lifespan. As ferret owners discover more and are taught more about the ferret, they'll undoubtedly be able to increase the expected lifespan significantly.

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



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).



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 6 to 8 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 $\frac{3}{8}$ ths 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.



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 III and IV of this book cover various issues related to exercise and health.)

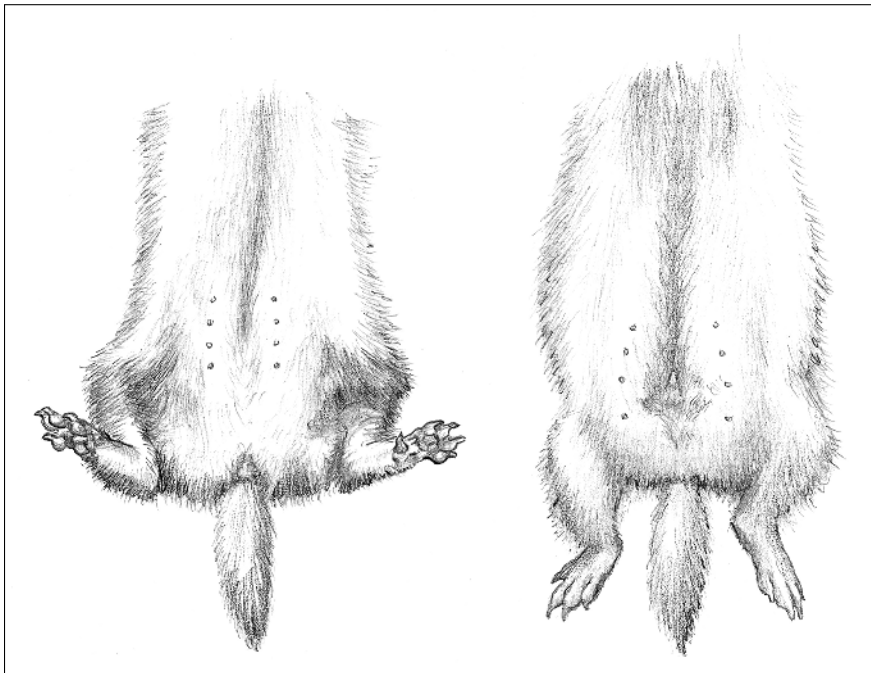
Getting to the point about claws and teeth

On each of a ferret's soft paws is a set of five nonretractable claws designed for digging and grasping. Nature designed the claws 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).



Declawing your ferret is a big, fat no-no. For a fuzzball, declawing is a painful, mutilating surgery with way more risks than benefits. Ferrets 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.

Figure 1-3: Male ferrets are bulkier, with their penises resembling belly buttons. Females are smaller and have vulval openings near the anus.



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 does it out of fear or play. An occasional warning nip may be a sign of the ferret's disapproval of one thing or another. (See Chapter 3 for more about the laws governing ferret bites.)



Make no doubt about it, the bite of a disgruntled ferret is painful and can draw blood. Take measures to make sure bites don't happen, and unless medically warranted for your ferret's health, don't alter his canine teeth; leave them right where they belong.

Making sense of senses

A ferret's senses vary in degree of acuteness (see Chapter 10 for more on ferret senses). Like human infants, a ferret's eyesight isn't that well-developed, and his ability to distinguish color is limited. A ferret can only see some reds and blues. Make no mistake about it, though: Even the most restricted ferret can and will find any object he wasn't intended to find (and his stubby little legs will help him steal the objects back to his hidey-hole). In a sense, all ferrets have sticky fingers: If they find it, it belongs to them. If they want it, it's theirs. You get the idea.

A ferret's sense of smell is far superior to a human's, and his little paw pads are more sensitive to the touch. Also, a fuzzy's sense of hearing is remarkable. If you open a bag of raisins from across your house, for example, be assured that your ferret will hear the bag opening and come a-begging. So, remember to whisper when discussing sensitive issues such as altering or going on vacation.

Have I mentioned that ferrets have another sense? They seem to understand us humans. Scary!

Exercise and Time Considerations — Yours and Your Fuzzy's

When determining whether a ferret is the perfect pet for you, get introspective and look at your lifestyle. Ferrets are interactive and intelligent pets that need a lot of attention. If you want a pet that you can keep in a cage and look at every once in a while, you must accept that a ferret isn't for you. Fish are good when left in their cages. Ferrets are exploratory characters that aim to

please their humans. Okay, they really aim to please themselves, but they tickle us pink in the process.

Ferrets need a lot of exercise and attention to be happy and healthy. Plan on spending no less than four hours a day playing in a safe, stimulating, enriched, ferret-proof environment. If you leave a fuzzy in a cage or unattended too often, it actually leads to boredom and stress, which can in turn lead to serious health issues. Trust me, it will do you a world of good to get down on the floor with your ferret and let out your inner fuzzy. (For more information about enriching your ferret's life, check out Chapter 10.)



If you don't think you can provide your ferret with the proper amount of exercise and attention, and that's your only ferret hang-up, perhaps you should consider adopting two ferrets. Ferrets live to play and they play to live, so if you can't be an interactive human all the time, get your fuzzy a playmate. Besides, although one furball is intensely amusing, two (or more) are downright hysterical. In fact, I recommend getting two or three no matter what (see Chapter 4 for more on this advice).

If you let him, a healthy caged ferret will sleep 18 to 20 hours a day. Does this make these ferrets nocturnal or diurnal? Neither. I think they should get a category all to themselves. How about ferturnal? Most weasels are considered nocturnal, although they may change their sleeping patterns depending on habitat, competition, and food availability. Like their polecat relatives, healthy, free-roaming ferrets with little cage time should sleep only 15 to 18 hours a day. Strive to make your ferrets as active as possible.

Ferrets tend to be *crepuscular*, which means they usually pep up and come out at dusk and dawn, similar to deer. However, ferrets change their activity levels to meet their humans' schedules. For example, if you're a night owl and sleep all day, your ferrets will be night owls too. Just as weasels will adapt to best suit their survival needs, ferrets can be diurnal, nocturnal, or crepuscular. What sleeping patterns your ferret adopts is up to you! (For tips on your ferret's cage and bedding for sleep time, see Chapter 5.)

Taking a Whiff of the Odor Factor

All ferrets come equipped with a really "neat" scenting mechanism. Located just outside the ferret's anus on both sides are anal sacs filled with foul-smelling fluid. All carnivores have these sacs, including the beloved canine. A ferret's system is quite different from the human scenting mechanism, though, which is more often than not triggered by disagreeable food or the simple desire to offend. When excited, overstimulated, scared, or angry, your ferret will, without aim, discharge his secret weapon. But the ferret's odor, although intentionally disturbing, rapidly dispels — just like yours! The following sections deal with a couple issues you face when playing the odor factor.

To descent or not to descent?

The majority of ferrets I've run across have been descented at a very early age — before they reach the pet trade. In other words, vets have removed their anal glands. Most ferrets are commercially raised in fuzzy farms where neutering and descenting occur before the fuzzies can be shipped out. As a new owner, you have no real way to tell whether a ferret has been descented, however. The moment of truth comes at the moment of nasal impact.

Personally I don't recommend descenting ferrets. I find it an unnecessary and potentially harmful procedure. However, some ferret owners can't or don't want to tolerate the rare "poof" of odor expelled from the undescented ferret. Finding a vet who's performed this procedure before may be a challenge, but most experienced ferret vets may be willing to take on the challenge and should do just fine. Don't be surprised if you find that this surgery doesn't cut down on the odor as much as you thought it would. The anal glands are not the problem! Ferrets are musky critters with oil glands in their skin. And unneutered ferrets are extremely smelly.

If you should happen upon a ferret with full scent capabilities in your search for a pet, take note, though: Descenting isn't necessary for living happily with a ferret. In fact, descenting is a North-American practice and is illegal in many European countries that consider it unethical. The ferret's scent glands may be an important behavioral and social tool. Perhaps they use scent as a means of identifying one ferret from another or determining the health status of another ferret. Scent may also indicate where a ferret is in its breeding cycle.

Unless medically necessitated, I suggest that you leave your ferret be and pay more heed to his emotional state so you can control the odor. Some people actually like the smell. I find myself neutral to it. Those of you who have roommates will surely agree that ferret odor is more often the lesser of the two evils.

Controlling your fuzzy's odor

The ferret's odor is unique and requires regular maintenance for odor control. You need to change his oil and rotate his tires every 3,000 miles, so to speak. Frequently changing his litter and bedding is the best way to control odor (see Chapter 9).



Bathing your ferret often results in a stinkier fuzzy because his oil glands go into overdrive to replace the oils you washed down the drain. I only bathe my ferrets a few times a year, and that seems plenty.

An expert's opinion on descenting

"Ferret farms descent ferrets in the mistaken belief that it decreases the odor of these musky pets. In fact, it is completely unnecessary for odor control. Unfortunately for the ferrets, descenting can lead to lifetime complications including draining tracts, chronic abscesses,

pain, and/or incontinence. As a veterinarian and ferret owner, I cannot recommend this as a routine procedure for any reason," says ferret expert Dr. Karen Purcell, author of *Essentials of Ferrets: A Guide for Practitioners* (AAHA Press) and relief veterinarian in New England.



There's always some odor involved with ferrets. Even the most well-cared-for ferret will have a slight musky smell. On average, the odor is no worse than a dog's smell; however, people's tolerances for smell are different. Obviously, if you let your ferret go for very long periods without a bath or if you become too lax with changing his litter box and bedding, his smell will become stronger.

Getting the Dish on Financial Matters

Ferrets are expensive pets. Whether you purchase your baby at a pet store, adopt her from a shelter, or have a neighbor leave her on your doorstep (see Chapter 4), you need to fork over not only emotion but also money. Investing in a ferret family member has many intangible rewards, but you must be willing to put out the cash when necessary to keep her safe and sound. The following list outlines the expenses you'll incur after adopting your fuzzy:

- ✔ **Basic accessories:** This category includes such things as cages, toys, bedding, bowls, litter boxes, treats, and so on.
- ✔ **Food:** Ferrets need high-quality ferret food, which is more costly than low-quality food. And the more ferrets you have, the more they'll eat. Are you willing to pay more for a high-quality food to keep your ferrets as healthy as possible? (See Chapter 8 for more on feeding your ferret.)
- ✔ **Neutering or spaying:** Your new baby may or may not be altered, but unless you plan on breeding, which I caution you to think twice about, get him altered as soon as possible. Besides being the responsible thing to do, it'll cut down on the odor.
- ✔ **Annual vet trips:** Besides regular checkups (see Chapter 12), your ferret should receive annual rabies and distemper vaccinations, as well as heartworm preventives (vaccinations may be required by law; see Chapter 3).

As your ferret ages, the chances of him developing an illness or disease increases. Often, this means more frequent trips to the vet for special tests and/or medication. You owe it to any pet you have to provide quality medical care at all times.



The dollars can add up. Think about starting a pet fund, in which you put aside a few dollars each week in case an emergency comes up and you fall a little short financially. Also, pet insurance is becoming more and more popular among ferret owners. Do your research (starting with your veterinarian) to see whether insurance is an avenue to pursue. Either way, do yourself a favor and put aside some funds if you can.

Extreme Cage Makeover: Providing the Space They Need

You shouldn't bring a ferret to your home before you've completely and adequately set up his house for his arrival. Even though ferrets make great pets for both the house and apartment, you shouldn't compromise one luxury: His cage should be roomy, and you should make adequate room for it. (See Chapter 5 for more on creating a ferret cage.)

If your only available space is a wall that's supporting the world's largest beer-bottle collection, you should consider parting with the bottles or packing them up. Even if you could squeeze in both the ferret and the beer bottles, doing so wouldn't be a good idea. Your carpet shark could knock them over and break them, or your thief could manage to drag a bottle or two back to his secret hidey-hole!

Facing the Challenges of Ferret-Proofing Your Home

Ferrets are trouble magnets. From digging up the plants and carpeting, to stealing your stuff, to terrorizing the cats and dogs — if something can be messed with, a ferret will mess with it.

I compare this vigorous playtime madness to a human toddler on a double espresso. To combat the madness and protect your ferret, you need to ferret-proof your home — or at least the areas the little bugger has access to. It may be as simple as moving the houseplants, or it may be as involved as boarding up the cracks and crevices under your cabinets. Nature designed the ferret to search out your ferret-proofing failures. Therefore, ferret-proofing is a continuous activity as your curious fuzzer finds more and more flaws.



If you even question whether something is unsafe, it's probably unsafe. Otherwise, you wouldn't give it a second thought. Expect the impossible, prepare for the worst, and hope for the best. What actually happens will probably be somewhere in between. For tips on how to make your home safe for your ferret, head to Chapter 6

Ferrets and Kids

Ferrets can make good pets for single people living in apartments and for families in homes. I don't like to stereotype human children as a whole by saying this pet or that pet isn't good with kids. Usually, it's the other way around. Many kids aren't good around certain types of pets, although many are great. I was taking care of pets before I was even 10 years old, and I did so with great pleasure and responsibility. I didn't mind getting scratched or bitten, and I didn't mind the cage cleaning. I was an exception to most kids.



Ferrets can be playfully nippy and squirmy, and they require a lot of attention and care. Most young children can and will activate the hyper switch in ferrets. And don't be fooled if your kid promises to be 100-percent responsible for his new ferret. You must evaluate your family members honestly before bringing a ferret home and expect that you'll be the main caretaker. See Chapter 7 for more on this topic.

Ferrets and Other Household Pets

All animals have unique personalities, so to assume that one pet will get along with another is to be overly optimistic — an attitude that could lead to heartbreak. Multi-species interaction is a complex issue. I simply can't guarantee that your new fuzzy will get along with your other pets.



Certain breeds of dogs are bred to hunt small animals, which the ferret is. And ferrets are bred as predators and may find birds, hamsters, and even small kittens as the perfect prey. Cats and ferrets often get along well, but you can't force a relationship that isn't there.

Having said all that, I don't see a reason why a ferret couldn't peacefully cohabitate in most homes if the owners use common sense. The key is to know your animals and their limits. Provide meticulous supervision at all times. When you introduce your pets, you may have to conclude that mixing the species just won't work in your home; be prepared to offer your ferret a safe place to adequately play away from all your other pets. (See Chapter 7 for more on introducing your ferret to other animals.)

Leaping over the Legal Hurdles

You must be aware of the legal aspects of owning a ferret. Before you consider the time, cost, adjustment, and olfactory aspects of ferret parenthood, do some digging to be sure that ferrets are legal where you live. What licenses may you need? What restrictions does your local government place on pet owners?

It's truly heartbreaking to lose a ferret to legal snags after investing so much time and love. Fortunately, I haven't experienced this pain firsthand, but I do shed tears when I read the emotional testimonies of people who've lost legal battles and ultimately their beloved fuzzies. For more information about the legal issues that govern owning a ferret, head to Chapter 3.