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History of the Ferret

The Small Mammals Health Series

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The domestic ferret has been a useful member of the human household for a few thousand years. Today ferrets have reached true companion animal status and are appreciated throughout much of the world.

Source of Domesticated Ferrets

The domestic ferret (*Mustela putorius furo*) is thought to have derived from the [Eastern European polecat](#) (*Mustela putorius putorius*), the [steppe polecat](#) (*Mustela eversmanni*) or a hybrid of both. Both polecats are similar in appearance and skeletal structure, and the domestic ferret can interbreed and produce fertile offspring with either species. While it is thought that the Eastern European polecat, the steppe polecat, and the black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*) may represent geomorphic variants of a single Holarctic species, the three species are not considered conspecific.

The black-footed ferret is not considered the progenitor of the domestic ferret. This ferret was native to the western United States and recently became nearly extinct in the wild. Black-footed ferrets are being reintroduced to their native habitat through captive breeding programs.

The name *Mustela* is a Latin derivation of the term *mus* for mouse. Animals in the *Mustela* genus include weasels and other “mouse catchers.” *Putorius* is from the Latin *putor*, which means a stench and refers to the musky odor of the ferret. *Furo* comes from the Latin *furonem*, meaning “thief.” So we have a mouse-catching, smelly, thief! The word ferret most likely comes from the Latin *furo* or the Italian *furone* with the same meaning of thief. Due to the difficulty in determining the paleontologic source of the domestic ferret, there was a recent ruling by the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature recommending a name change for the domestic ferret from *Mustela putorius furo* to *Mustela furo*.

Evidence of Domestication

In order for a species to be considered domesticated, there are a number of criteria that must be met. One criterion is that the domesticated animal should provide a service or product that

is useful to humans. In the section *Historical Use* below, the usefulness of ferrets to humankind is detailed.

Another criterion for domestication is that the reproduction of the species is controlled by humans; that is to say, natural selection is replaced by human selection. There is little doubt that humans have controlled ferret breeding for a long time and continue to do so.

One final criterion for domestication involves some physical or behavioral change from the original non-domestic species. There are a number of physical changes noted in the domesticated ferret including changes in behavior, changes in fur color (particularly the common occurrence of albinism), and changes in body size and skull shape. Two notable behavioral changes include a decrease in aggressive behaviors and the ability to live in groups as opposed to a solitary life-style. The ability to live in small groups may represent retention of juvenile characteristics where young ferrets live within a littermate situation. Retention of juvenile behavioral characteristics is a common consequence of domestication in a number of species. Juveniles are generally less aggressive than adults and are thus easier for humans to manage.

The ferret of today is unquestionably domesticated. Not only are we uncertain about the specific progenitor of the domestic ferret, we cannot at this time be certain when or where domestication occurred. Early mustelids have been on earth since the Oligocene epoch (24 to 38 million years ago). Ferrets were mentioned in Grecian plays as early as 450 BC, and again in Roman documents about the time of Christ. However, the animals mentioned were already domesticated ferrets. It seems ferrets were domesticated at least 2500 years ago. There are three current theories involving domestication of this species. It is possible (but not likely) that ferrets were domesticated by the Egyptians. It is more likely that ferrets were already domesticated by the time the species entered the Mediterranean area. It is also possible that ferrets were domesticated in the Mediterranean area in Greece or perhaps by the Phoenicians.

Since ferrets were domesticated for use as rabbit and mouse hunters, they were likely popular with the lower social classes. Modern archaeology is just now beginning to emphasize the totality of civilizations rather than just the royalty and upper social classes. It is hoped that evidence to document the time, place and species of the domestic ferret will be found in the future.

Historical Use

Somewhere between 63 BC and 24 AD, Strabo writes of a plague of rabbits in the Balearic Islands in the Mediterranean that was causing a famine. He describes a Libyan animal that was bred for the purpose of hunting, was muzzled and put into rabbit holes. This animal, whose behavior sounds like a ferret, would cause the rabbit to bolt from the hole where men and dogs were ready to dispatch it. This practice bears a striking resemblance to the practice of ferreting that has taken place in Europe for centuries. Pliny in AD 23 to 79 and St. Isidore of Seville in AD 600 also mention ferrets being used to hunt rabbits. Ferrets may also have been kept around households to control rodents, but the majority of references relate to ferrets and rabbits. The ferret's close cousin, the mongoose, was used more often for rodent and snake control and continues to be used in this manner today in areas where the

mongoose is indigenous.

By the 1200s ferrets had spread to Germany and there are stories that Genghis Khan may have used ferrets in Afghanistan in 1221. The first references in England are in 1223 and again in 1281 where a ferreter was listed as part of the Royal Court. Other interesting bits of information from England in the late 1200s to the late 1300s include the fact that one needed an annual income of forty shillings to own a ferret, and that ferrets were owned by high-ranking church officials. King Richard II issued a decree in 1384 allowing one of his clerks to hunt rabbits with ferrets and again in 1390 prohibiting the use of ferrets on Sunday. In 1551, Gerner in Zurich described the first albino ferret as "the colour of wool stained with urine." From here on, there is increasing evidence in Medieval European literature of ferrets being used to hunt rabbits. Ferrets were also used for fur production, although this seemed less popular until the 20th century. In addition, probably by at least the 18th century ferrets were being used on ships to help control the rodents that were so prevalent. It is also highly likely that a few humans historically also enjoyed the ferret's lively personality and kept these little critters purely for their companionship.

It is clear that ferrets were used early on to hunt rabbits, both as a pest control measure and as a sport. There is evidence that Roman soldiers routinely used ferrets in hunting rabbits. Ferrets may have spread to the northern European continent during the spread of the Roman Empire, or as others have suggested they may have spread with Norman invasions. It does seem clear, however, that wherever ferrets went there were rabbits. The European rabbit, which, by the way, is also the ancestor of our pet rabbits, originated in the Iberian Peninsula, in the region of Spain and has been raised in captivity for at least 2000 years. Rabbits were intentionally introduced into Northern Europe and it appears ferrets were introduced along with them.

In the 1860s, New Zealand colonizers imported game animals including the rabbit. By the 1870s rabbits were decimating the landscape because there are no natural predators that control the rabbits in New Zealand. Five ferrets were released in 1879 to control the rabbit population. This was followed by the release of thousands from 1882 to 1886. Stoats and weasels, which are close relatives of the ferret, were also released. Ferrets developed feral (able to live under "wild" conditions) colonies in New Zealand, which contributed to a disastrous decline in native birds. Ferrets were able to live successfully in the wild because the climate of New Zealand may be ideal, and the ferrets had no predators other than man. Many of New Zealand's birds are flightless and at risk of losing their lives to ground-dwelling predators such as ferrets. Ferrets are not the only factor in the loss of these species, but their presence is significant. The current estimate of the number of feral ferrets between the two islands is around one million.

Rabbits were introduced into Australia by early British settlers for much the same reason and with the same consequence as in New Zealand. Ferrets were then introduced to control the situation. However, in Australia, ferrets were not able to establish feral colonies probably because they have predators such as fox, feral cats, dingoes and hawks.

In recent history there has been a significant decrease in the use of ferrets for hunting rabbits, rodent control, and fur production. They are now more commonly kept as pets. Ferrets are kept as companion animals in South Africa and Japan as well as most of Europe at this time.

Introduction to the United States

Ferrets were probably introduced into this country in the 18th century via ships that carried them as ratters. In addition, some colonists brought them over as hunting companions. By the early 1900s, ferrets were being imported by the tens of thousands to be used as vermin exterminators. They were used to destroy rabbits, raccoons, gophers, rats and mice. Prey animals will usually flee in the presence of the "scent of a ferret." Ferrets were needed to protect barns, warehouses and granaries. The U.S. Department of Agriculture promoted the use of ferrets for rodent control. If your farm was infested you could call the ferretmeister to come and release ferrets on your property. The ferrets went on a search and destroy mission and then humans and dogs, usually terriers, who were placed around the area would kill the vermin that escaped. Some establishments simply maintained their own colony of ferrets for this purpose. When chemical rodenticides became available there was no further need for the "ferret patrol," and this practice died out.

Fur farming never took a strong hold in the U.S. and hunting with ferrets was made illegal in most states in the 20th century. In the mid-20th century ferrets were readily embraced as companion animals by Americans, and this continues to be the primary role of the ferret in the U.S. today. There are currently no feral populations of *Mustela putorius furo* in the U.S. The only ferret introduced into the U.S. has been the domestic form, not the wild polecat.

Use of Ferrets

The following lists some the historic and modern uses for the ferret:

Hunting Rabbits. As mentioned, this was probably one of the first historical uses of the domestic ferret and perhaps the main reason for domestication. The use of a ferret to hunt rabbits is commonly called ferreting. Ferrets were used both for rabbit population control and as a means for humans to obtain food. There is very little training involved because ferrets naturally enjoy running through burrows and seeking out prey. In ancient times, muzzles were used to prevent the ferret from killing and eating the rabbit underground (after which it would take a nap). There is also evidence that some ancient ferreters made holes in the upper and lower lip of the ferret and tied the lips together or placed a metal ring to hold the lips together before a hunt. Fortunately, muzzles are not used today, but occasionally a harness with a long line attached is employed. These items are rarely needed because when the rabbit smells the ferret coming, and it bolts out its escape hole before it can be caught. Prior to releasing the ferret, the rabbit holes are covered by purse string nets held in place by stakes. The net closes around the rabbit as it tries to escape. Alternatively dogs, such as terriers or lurchers (a dog that contains greyhound blood) chase and catch the rabbit or the hunter shoots the rabbit. Lighter colored ferrets are preferred because they are easier to see and retrieve after a hunt. Ferreting is still practiced in some areas of the world.

Rodent control. It is likely that ferrets were also used for rodent control around houses as soon as they were domesticated. Small mammals and birds make up the majority of the wild ferret's diet and if allowed it is certain they would have hunted within the household. As mentioned, in more recent times, ferrets were used to control rodents around barns and granaries and on European and American ships. The Massachusetts Colonial Navy, which was organized on December 29, 1775, was reactivated in 1967 and in 1986 proclaimed the

ferret its official mascot. An excerpt from the ceremonial speech shows the importance of ferrets on these ships. "Now in the days of the wooden men o' war there was quite often, an uninvited population of rodents aboard ship. Dogs were completely unsuccessful mousers and besides their barking kept both captain and crew awake. Cats were infinitely preferred over dogs, but they were unable to chase mice into the many narrow holes and passageways aboard the ship, so more mice escaped than were caught. But there was one animal the rats and mice could never escape from no matter where they tried to hide...no matter how small a hole they ran into they were doomed! This animal was one of man's best friends and totally fearless. They were in great demand aboard ships of the colonial navy, and fortunate indeed were the crews that had a ferret for a mascot and friend."

Fur Production. Ferrets have been raised for fur production for centuries in Europe and in the early 1900s an effort was made to establish this practice in the U.S. The wild coloring of the ferret is preferred and it is likely there was a considerable amount of breeding back to the wild European polecat to maintain the uniformity and quality of the fur. A coat made out of ferret fur is called a fitch coat. Fortunately the practice of breeding ferrets for their fur has become much less common and eventually may be abandoned altogether.

Transporters. The ferret's anatomy and willingness to run through dark tunnels make them ideal in transporting cables through long pipes. Oilmen in the North Sea, telephone companies, camera crews and people working on airline jets have used ferrets for this purpose. The ferret wears a harness where a long thin nylon line is attached. The nylon line is then connected to the cable that needs to be pulled through the conduit. The use of mechanical devices for this purpose has made the ferret obsolete as a transporter.

Ferret Legging. This silly English pub sport has been around for centuries, but fortunately is no longer common. The contestant must tie his trousers legs securely around the ankles, then place two ferrets that have full sets of teeth down his pants, and finally tie the waist of his trousers securely closed. If a ferret bites, it can only be dislodged from the outside of the pants. The object is to be the person that keeps the ferrets in his pants the longest. In 1983 a 72-year old Yorkshire man withstood the ferrets for 5 hours and 26 minutes.

Biomedical research – Ferrets became models for biomedical research in the 20th century. One of their first uses was for the study of human influenza virus, to which they are susceptible. Currently they are used in virology, toxicology, pharmacology, reproductive physiology, endocrinology, physiology, teratology, and anatomy research. A fortunate byproduct of their use in research has been tremendous growth in our understanding of ferret anatomy, physiology and ferret disease. Biomedical use of ferrets is greatest in the U.S. because of the presence of large-scale ferret breeding facilities that can produce healthy ferrets in large numbers. Other countries lack these facilities and thus ferrets are not used as readily. For better or worse, these breeding facilities produce the largest percentage of ferrets used for pets as well.

Companion Animals – By far the most common use for ferrets today is as a companion animal. They are small, easy to care for and have entertaining and responsive personalities. Ferrets are bred in an astounding variety of color variations and now a longhaired ferret is available. Organizations devoted to the nurturing of ferrets as pets have sprung up all over the world. Devoted ferret owners attend ferret shows where their pets compete in areas such

as color classes, best-dressed ferret, yawning contests, and races involving bags and long tubes. It is perhaps fitting after a history of working for humans that ferrets should now enjoy a life of luxury as a beloved companion!

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