



FUN WITH FERRETS

Nick Mays talks with a leading ferret fancier, and discovers how preconceptions about this member of the mustelid family are misplaced.

Animals, and especially those kept as pets, tend to attract clichés. You know the kind of thing. You tell someone in conversation that you keep rabbits: “Oh, I bet they breed a lot!” comes the reply. You own up to keeping mice: “They must smell!” is a pretty stock response. In the case of fancy rats, it’s often something on the lines of “Eww! Did they come out of a sewer?”

Oh, how we all laugh...or not, especially when it’s really not true and you’ve heard it a hundred times before. And then of course, there are ferrets, with the stock cliché question in this case being: “Do you put them down your trousers?”

Ferrets are special!

Donna Brooke from Newark in Nottinghamshire would probably be the first to tell you that if you did put a ferret down your trousers, the chances are that it would just settle down and go to sleep because it was nice and warm there! But how would she try to sum up the appeal of ferrets for someone who has never kept them?

“They are such funny little characters, full of life and fun. They’re also intelligent and can be challenging to own. There’s never a dull moment with a ferret in the house,” she admits with a smile.

I too have to confess an interest here,



because I’ve kept ferrets in the past and one of these was a rescued ferret named ‘Twiggy’, who was, I have no hesitation in relating, one of the liveliest, funniest, most affectionate pets that I’ve ever kept. He was like a combination of the best bits of a dog and cat – or more specifically, a puppy and a kitten, given his lively nature, and he became a firm family favourite.

Is it fair to say that ferrets are Donna’s favourite animal then? She gives a

▲ Ferrets do enjoy exploring around the home.

surprisingly careful, considered response: “Perhaps and yet perhaps not! There are so many animals that I like so I find it difficult to have a favourite. I love horses and elephants as well as ferrets, dogs, cats, hedgehogs and foxes. I could go on but I’m sure you get the picture,” she says. Well, quite. You’d need a lot of space to keep even a small elephant though, and probably a licence too, so on this comparison alone, a ferret is a pretty good choice!



Right: Ferrets are full of character.

Left: Donna also loves horses – not to mention elephants! PHOTO COURTESY DONNA BROOKE.

Below: Just like dogs and cats, ferrets enjoy playing with toys.



Starting out

Donna’s introduction to ferrets came about in an unexpected and very distressing way, as she explains. “I encountered my first ferret on my way home from work. A group of young boys were just starting to play football with him as the ball. The poor ferret had fallen from the top balcony of a three-storey block of flats. Even though he had a broken back, he remained gentle and I managed to return him to his owner. You can guess that the end wasn’t good, but he stole my heart.”



“Then my vet rang me and said they had a client trying to rehome two ferrets that had been handed in to them. When I went to see them, it was clear that their previous owner had neglected them. Seeing them like that, I couldn’t walk away without them. I admit that I had done very little research into ferrets at that stage, and I had quite a learning experience with them, but boy, what a journey it set me on!”



The choice of colours in ferrets is increasingly varied these days. PHOTO COURTESY DONNA BROOKE.



Donna’s group of ferrets, dubbed the Three Musketeers! PHOTO COURTESY DONNA BROOKE.

Spreading the word

These days, there are ferret clubs offering plenty of help and advice to newcomers. “I used to be a member of Allshires Ferret Club,” says Donna. “I became involved when a friend who ran a rescue introduced me to a group of people who really wanted to set up a club to show their pets and educate the public. I was involved as member right from the start. Sadly though, that club no longer exists today.”

Club membership usually leads to all sorts of things, like committee jobs. Had Donna been drawn into the heady world of club committees? She laughs. “I wasn’t actually a committee member but I did produce the club newsletter. I loved doing it, especially at Christmas. It was often difficult, as it was hard to get members to contribute with articles, but it was a great thing to do.

“I have also been a moderator on



▲ The European polecat (*Mustela putorius*) is the ferret's wild relative.

www.ferretsforum.org which was the largest UK ferret forum on the Internet for many years. Sadly, the forum was hacked and we lost it and had to start again. I now own it. It's much smaller than it was, but packed with lots of information and has some very experienced owners there to give advice when needed."

Different forms of ferret

So, are there different varieties of ferrets and ferret shows as there are with rabbits, hamsters, rats and many other small pets? "To me and most other owners in the UK, ferrets are ferrets," says Donna emphatically. "They vary in colour but unlike dogs, they aren't split into different breeds. When showing, the classes are separated into colours of which there are many.

▼ Special housing and feeding for ferrets has both simplified and improved their care.

PHOTO COURTESY DONNA BROOKE.



Ferrets that are used to being handled from an early age are very friendly.



Ferrets can be exercised outdoors on a harness and leash.

"Recently, long coated or Angora ferrets have been introduced into the ferret world. A longer-standing and more controversial crossing has been matings between ferrets and their wild relative, known as the European polecat. This results in a much bigger and very dark coated, almost black animal. Individuals of this type, if not regularly and correctly handled from a very young age, can be very aggressive and they are definitely not an ideal pet!"

Donna has also been a ferret judge and would happily judge them again. To date, she has only adjudicated at shows in the UK. However, the ferret fancy is now spread far and wide around the world, so who knows?

Advances in care

It's a clear fact that there are many hundreds of people keeping ferrets as pets in the UK today, and that ferrets have soared in popularity as pets. Does Donna think ferret care has changed much over the years that she has been involved in keeping them? "Yes, immensely, and for the better," she says enthusiastically.

"Much more is known about ferret health and husbandry. There are complete dried foods available for ferrets today, and these greatly simplify their care. Much better specialist housing is easy to buy now as well, so these factors have made it much easier to keep ferrets,

and they are now far more popular as pets."

That's certainly encouraging news. So presumably Donna's family share her love of ferrets and animals in general? "My family are all animal lovers but they don't share my fascination with ferrets at all. In fact they think I am quite mad!" she laughs.

Other pets and pastimes

So what other pets have shared Donna's life and home? "How much time do you have?" she asks. "Currently I live with a Parson Jack Russell terrier, a Japanese Shiba Inu, four ferrets (I've had twenty-one ferrets over the years) and a western hognose snake. We've also lived with cats, rabbits, rats, birds, fish, tree frogs, iguanas, geckos, several different snakes, mice, hamsters, a hermit crab and axolotls down the years. Our first two dogs were both Shiba Inus."

And is there time for other hobbies and interests? "I like to horse ride. My husband has a motorbike that we both enjoy travelling on and I do needle felt which is a craft activity that uses wool to create 3D sculptures. I make teddy bears and all sorts of animals including pet portraits."

International interest

Donna explains: "Ferrets are now very popular as pets and I would say, based on my experience, that the majority of owners in the UK are women. Ferrets are still used to hunt, which is what they love to do and owners need to remember this, in order to provide a properly enriched environment for them.

"They are popular all over the world as pets, although there are a few areas where you will not encounter them," admits Donna. "It is illegal to own ferrets in 24 of the 50 states making up the USA, as well as New Zealand, plus the Australian states of Queensland and Northern Territory, with restrictions on their ownership in the rest of Australia, as well as in Brazil, Canada and Japan. Here in Europe, we are much more tolerant, to the extent that ferrets, like cats and dogs, can now travel in the same way across the continent with a pet passport."

Advice when starting out

So does Donna have any advice for anyone who is interested or just starting out to keep ferrets and who may want to show them as well? She answers emphatically: "Research, research and more research! A ferret is not straightforward in its needs. In order to care for them correctly, just like any pet, you need to be well informed.

"My advice when it comes to breeding them would simply be don't do it! There are thousands of ferrets in rescue centres needing homes. If you are a new owner, then please consider taking on one of



▲ It is mainly women who keep pet ferrets, according to Donna.

PHOTO COURTESY DONNA BROOKE.

these ferrets. A good rescue organisation will match you with a ferret that suits you, and you will have their expertise and support when starting out. Believe me, it will soon develop rapidly into an obsession!"

Changing perceptions

Has the image of ferrets in general, and that of them as pets, changed much during the years that Donna has been involved with the ferret fancy? "I think the general public still see ferrets rather as smelly, biting monsters, but people are won over when they meet them at shows and similar events. Once you've met one and had a good experience, you can't help being more curious about them, especially as they make such interesting companions."

So are people better aware of the requirements of ferrets nowadays too? "As with all pets, there will always be cases of ignorance, but lots more is widely known now about ferret husbandry, and there are many rescues and clubs working hard to promote their health and well being," she replies. "They may not be the easiest of small furry pets to look after, but they are very rewarding, intelligent pets and will return your love and affection, building up a strong bond with you in the process.

Is it fair to say that Donna sees herself as always having ferrets in her life? There's no hesitation in her reply: "Absolutely. I can't imagine life without them!" ■



◀ Donna's Shiba Inu (left) and Parson Jack Russell terrier.

PHOTO COURTESY DONNA BROOKE.

Further information



To find out more about ferrets and keeping them as pets, go online to www.ferretsforum.org