

# Ferret owners speak up for pets

By Jeff Knaysi  
For the Oregon Daily Emerald

Ferrets will not rip your face off, eat your baby or give you rabies. But they definitely smell terrible.

Unfortunately, many Americans may never have the chance to savor the horrendous stench of a ferret because of widespread prejudice against the furry creature.

Ferrets have been accused of spreading rabies, destroying crops, killing livestock and other vicious activities, all of which are false. They are often confused with the vicious European polecat, which kills its prey.

Still, it is this ignorance that has caused many states and cities to ban the ferret as a pet by classifying them as wild animals, alongside cougars and tigers.

This will change if Mike McCarthy, a forestry worker who is staunchly pro-ferrets, has his way.

While he was on business in California last September, he and his ferrets were harassed and blackballed. He is joining a class action suit to re-legalize ferrets against the state of California, which banned ferrets as pets in 1987.

"It's absurd," he said. "There's a lot of scary stories that they kill babies or chickens. That's ridiculous."

McCarthy wants to go down to California in a month and a half to take part in the suit. Ferrets are also banned as pets in Massachusetts, Hawaii and Michigan.

Ferrets, like many other creatures, have had a stigma attached to them that is not based on scientific evidence. Ironically, most specialists believe that ferrets were bred as pets by the ancient Egyptians 300 to 500 years before cats seductively twitched their butts and captured the hearts of humans.

Apparently, eight million Americans are continuing this trend, according to the American Ferret Association. By McCarthy's estimation, there are about 5,000 to 10,000 ferrets in Lane County alone, although there is no way this can be confirmed.



NORMAN MESMAN for the Emerald

Eight million Americans own ferrets despite the stigma attached to them. There are about 5,000 to 10,000 ferret owners in Lane County.

The popularity of this cousin of the weasel was confirmed by Electra, a clerk at Scamp's Pet Store in Valley River Center, where ferrets sell for \$69.99.

"We usually get them in every couple of weeks," Electra said. "They are a quick sale."

Steve Close, a University English graduate teaching fellow, had a ferret for three years until he had to put it to sleep because of cancer. He loved the creature despite the fact that it loved to bite.

"They like ankles. ... They know whose ankles to bite, whose not to bite," he said.

In fact, most ferrets love to bite so much that sleeping with them is not advised.

"Anything that sticks out, he'd bite. He bit toes and other assorted items," Close said. "Not good to sleep with."

The mechanics of owning a ferret are pretty similar to owning a cat, though ferrets need a little more care and training. While they will most likely nip everything they see as youngsters, all that is needed is a tweak on the nose and a firm "no."

The young animal will soon learn if it is given proper training. For nourishment, it is advised to feed your pet ferret dried cat food.

As for toilet needs, they are "easier to litter train than a cat," McCarthy said. They will gener-

ally pick out a corner and mark their territory by urinating in it. This is where you should lay down a litter box.

Some ferrets, such as the one Close owned, would change their preferred area every two months or so. And, as with any animals, there are always funny bathroom stories.

"Our dog came in the house, and he thought the ferrets were little dogs, so he pissed on everything in the house to mark his territory. He was a pretty stupid dog," Russ Chinske, a University senior and former ferret owner, said.

One thing that will strike you immediately about ferrets is their stench.

"They have quite an aroma," said Fran, a dispatcher at the Lane County Animal Control Center. "You either love them or you hate them. But they are really fun to watch play."

There is a simple remedy — they can be descented (have their musk glands removed) for about \$100, and this should take care of most of the problem, though a faint odor will linger. Keep in mind that ferrets are related to skunks, with the main difference being most skunks speak with a French accent.

For those still skeptical, Mike McCarthy spoke for most owners when he said, "They take some getting used to. Now I wouldn't have any other pet."

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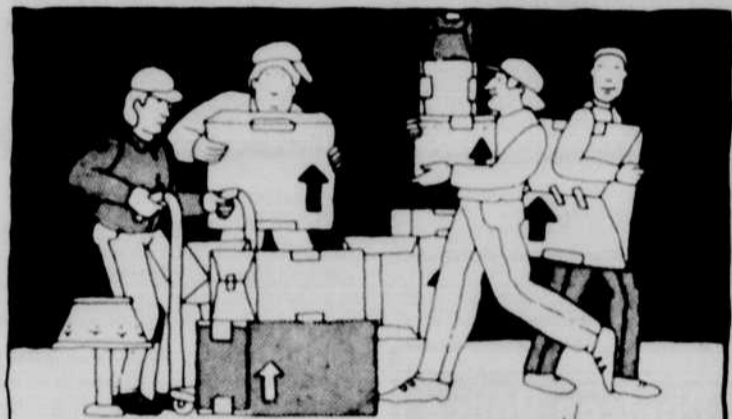
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