

Ferret Filmmaking Magic

Behind the scenes at the filming of the documentary *Ferrets: The Pursuit Of Excellence*

By Marylou Zarbock

Posted: April 2, 2008, 5 a.m. EDT

Nigel the ferret shows his acting chops in the shower scene at Pam VanOverloop's. Courtesy of Pam VanOverloop

To do a documentary about showing ferrets, you have to go to the source. In 2006, director Mark Lewis and his crew trekked to perhaps the largest ferret show in the country, The Buckeye Bash in Columbus, Ohio. The fruit of their efforts debuted as the show *Ferrets: The Pursuit Of Excellence* on PBS this past July 2007.

The documentary didn't limit itself to the show hall. Several ferret owners opened their homes to Lewis and his crew.

How some of the shots were achieved and what went on behind the scenes during filming could make a movie in itself. Splattering an entire bathroom with water, covering a living room in a trail of plastic bags and having the contents of a refrigerator spoil are some of the highlights we gathered from interviewing the interviewees about their experiences.

Long Days

One ingredient for successful filming is putting in the time to make it great. Interviews by Lewis and his crew generally lasted for a day, sometimes two. "Over the course of two days filming at my house, there must have been at least 14 hours on film. I was interviewed/filmed for a solid hour," said Peg Francisco of Ohio. "Mark indicated that getting two usable minutes out of each day's filming was considered, 'very successful.'"

Creating A Scene

Several ferret owners found that when they mentioned a particular ferret behavior or event, Lewis and his crew wanted to capture it on film. Pam VanOverloop of Ohio told Lewis that she bathed her ferrets in the shower before a show. "Imagine my horror when he said he wanted to capture that on film!" she exclaimed.

The crew arrived the next day with the camera enclosed in a waterproof cover. VanOverloop stood (fully dressed) outside the tub holding her ferret Nigel beneath the water stream so the cameraman in the back of the tub could get the shot. "It was trickier than I imagined, bathing a ferret while holding it at an awkward angle to get just the right shot without unwanted shadows."

VanOverloop got soaked and water ran down her arms onto the floor. Afterward, Nigel enjoyed a big, warm towel and lots of attention. The cameraman stayed relatively dry, but VanOverloop mopped up a very wet room and needed to change into dry clothes.

During her interview, Kerry Fabrizio of Ohio mentioned that in the past one of her ferrets really enjoyed being tossed gently on a bedsheet. That ferret, Lily, was no longer with her, but the film crew wanted to capture the game. Fabrizio chose the ferret she thought would enjoy it most, and they filmed a few tosses with the ferret on the sheet.

When they filmed shots focused on either Kerry or her husband as they tossed the sheet, a stunt double was used instead of a ferret because the camera wouldn't see it. The stunt double chosen for this task? A shoe. Why? Because a shoe was nearby when they realized they needed something with a bit of weight to toss on the sheet.

Francisco's ferrets were the stars of the tube sequence on the stairs, sometimes referred to as ferret luge. Her ferret Misty ran up the stairs. It took several hours to get 10 or 11 takes. "She loves the stairs and the attention, and she let us know when she had had enough," Francisco said.

After Misty was done, Oreo took over to slide down the tube. A dolly on a track controlled the speed of the camera as it followed Oreo's movement. Once he was down, the ferret wrangler passed him up the stairs to slide down again. Francisco said that it was all done with treats, praise and concern for the ferrets' well-being.

Ferret Stars

"I think the ferrets all took it in stride. After all, they are all show-offs and hams," said Scarlett Gray-Saling about how ferrets reacted to the filming. Gray-Saling is the event coordinator for the Buckeye Bash.

When Vickie McKimney of Maryland took the film crew on a “tour” of the ferret room, the ferrets just hung out in their hammocks. “It was nothing special, they’re used to people coming to see them,” she said.

McKimney doesn’t usually let her ferrets watch TV, but she thought about letting them watch the show. She laughed as she said she decided not to, so they wouldn’t get bigger heads than they already had from winning at the Buckeye Bash (her segment was filmed after the Bash). She did watch the show with her French bulldog, which had a cameo appearance.

Fabrizio’s ferrets had difficulty settling down for the shoot because the director requested that most of the filming be done in her living room. The ferrets have their own room and normally don’t visit the living room, so they were excited at seeing the new territory.

For a few days after the filming, her ferrets dug at the door of their ferret room trying to get back to this new “land.” They stopped, but Fabrizio has purchased a see-through gate to keep them in their room. Now they see the big world outside. Fabrizio calls it People TV when they watch events on the other side of their gate.

Barb Carlson of Pennsylvania demonstrated ferret bowling during the show. After a slide, one ferret nipped the cameraman. Later, another ferret climbed the camera on the floor and stole the foam microphone cover. “I thought the cameraman would have been upset, but he thought that was really funny.”

During her singing sequence, Carlson experienced other difficulties. Her ferret Meringue-atang wasn’t thrilled about being held during the song. Then the director asked her to do it again, and her ferret was even more fidgety. “I’m sure it drove them nuts that I didn’t just stand still, but the ferret kept trying to leap out of my arms. I think the poor thing had to potty.”

Suzy Mentzer and Joe Hahn of Ohio regularly take their ferrets on walks outside, held in their arms. The ferrets are always excited to be outdoors, so they didn’t care when the camera and crew shadowed them to film that sequence.

Tricks Of The Trade

Interviews are the backbone to filming. The director chose to interview couples like Kerry and Brian Fabrizio separately and then together. This surprised Brian Fabrizio, because he wasn’t expecting to be interviewed.

The old “switcheroo” was employed during several scenes in the show. The ferret stealing the plastic bag from the drawer was played by two of McKimney’s ferrets. The boy was better at running with the bags and the girl was better at looking up curiously at the drawer of bags. It was McKimney’s living room that got “plastic bagged.”

Multiple ferrets were also used during the walk outside with Mentzer and Hahn. It was a very warm day, and the director asked them to walk at least eight times. Mentzer switched out the ferrets to avoid having any get ill from the heat. She was glad she had so many ferrets that looked similar and could double for each other.

Editing creates a magic all its own. A case in point is the French bulldog that seems to be barking at a ferret escaping from a cage. “We laughed about that,” Carlson said. “The dog was in Virginia and the ferret was in Pennsylvania. They did a great job using the clips, though. It was really funny! I knew what they did, and I still thought it was great.”

Think fishing line is for fishing? Think again. “We learned one of Mark’s ‘director secrets’ for filming animals — clear fishing line!” Francisco said it was used for tipping over the house plant that Oreo dug in and for getting ferrets to run on cue by having them chase objects pulled by fishing line.

The crew also put fishing line into action during the scene at Carlson’s home when her ferret Tequila was beneath an overturned litter pan making it move. They didn’t think Tequila got the box moving fast enough across the floor, so they attached fishing line and pulled it. They must’ve changed their mind about using that footage. Carlson was pleasantly pleased when she saw that in the final show, the shot used was Tequila moving the litter pan on her own.

VanOverloop required movie magic of a different kind. Filming at her home occurred after the Buckeye Bash. Unfortunately, she had been bitten on the nose during the Bash. When filming day approached, two thick scabs marred her nose. Co-workers helped her use make-up to camouflage the injury. She doesn’t usually wear make-up and felt like she had a mask on during filming, but the end result looked good for the camera. Happily, her nose healed and she barely has a scar.

Outtakes & Hijinks

Always expect the unexpected when filming. The director asked to film ferrets in other parts of VanOverloop's home. She was unsure what would happen because her ferrets aren't usually allowed upstairs. Then he asked her to put her ferret Lady Emma on the piano. The ferret ran back and forth across the keys for each take. "The soundman finally asked, 'Doesn't she know another song?'" VanOverloop said. "Sure enough, each time she ran across the keyboard she was hitting the same notes!"

The director also suggested doing a scene outside with VanOverloop walking her ferret Booger on leash. He asked her to go to the end of the street and come back. "As much as my Booger enjoys time outside, I knew that between his short legs and all those distracting new smells it would take a very long time to get back to the house," VanOverloop recalled.

Adding a complication was the arrival of a school bus bringing home neighborhood children. The youngsters clustered around them. VanOverloop didn't know whether the ferret or the camera crew fascinated them more. "The director was very patient with the children and let them take turns saying, 'Action.' We finally got what little footage we could by letting the ferret be a ferret and explore at his own pace in the neighbor's front yard."

Carlson was caught off-guard with her song. "They interviewed me for three hours in the morning. After my voice was all faded from the lengthy interview, that's when they asked me to sing my song — twice!"

A forgotten plug left Francisco with a belated surprise. While filming the last scene at her house, the recording equipment picked up the hum of her refrigerator. It was unplugged and filming continued.

"It was the end of the day. We were all very tired," Francisco said. "The [crew] needed to pack up and head for Columbus. All of my weezils needed washing and the car packed before we drove to Columbus for the show the next day. When we returned home on Sunday, the house smelled a bit 'off.'"

She then found a message on her answering machine from the director's assistant apologizing for Mark forgetting to plug in the refrigerator. He reimbursed her for the food that spoiled.

Impressions about The Crew

"I think the documentary turned out great!" Francisco said. Mark Lewis made a very favorable impression on her. He and his crew filmed at her home first, and none of them were really familiar with ferrets.

"One of the first things we did was to get everyone comfortable around the furguys," she said. They also discussed how to keep the ferrets safe during filming. Getting the ferrets to cooperate was a key factor.

Francisco said that Lewis understood that to succeed it had to be fun for the ferrets, and he listened to any suggestions she had. "It really was a collaboration."

What It Means

The show has already reached beyond being mere entertainment. "It's been wonderful the response the show has gotten," Gray-Saling said. "I've talked to quite a few people that said they saw me on TV and didn't realize ferrets were so personable. They all came out with different parts they like best. It's so nice to have good PR out there about ferrets."

Additionally, the show increased interest in the 2007 Buckeye Bash. "I've gotten calls and e-mails from all over the country of people wanting to come, even to just attend," Gray-Saling said.

Mentzer thinks it's wonderful that the crew took the interest and time to do the show. She's glad for the publicity it gives ferrets. Several of her co-workers were interested in the show, and one man who saw it said he couldn't wait to see it again.

If you can't wait to see it again — or for the first time — and there's no rebroadcast scheduled, check out the DVD. It's available at www.ShopPBS.org and Amazon.com.