

Ferrets' Puzzling Water Habits

Why do ferrets dig at or dunk their heads in full water bowls?

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Q: In late 2008, I introduced Starr, a 4-month-old female, sable ferret to her new family — Silas, a 4-year-old male, albino ferret and Woodstock, a 3-year-old male dark-eyed white ferret. Starr has such personality and does so many things I never saw “the boys” do. One is that she puts her paws on either side of her water bowl, like she is swimming or clearing leaves. I keep five bowls of water for them that are cleaned several times a day, so her behavior isn’t caused by dirt. Woody doesn’t do anything odd, but Silas frequently puts his head in the water up to his ears, like he is searching for prawns. He particularly likes a 6-inch-deep, plastic bowl for this. Do you know why Starr and Silas behave like this around the water bowls? My ferrets share a ferret-proof room with access to a cage.

A: In the ferret world, the water behavior you describe is often called snorkeling. Well, in the human-ferret world anyway. Many ferrets seem to enjoy playing in their water, for whatever reason. I presume it has something to do with a natural behavior related to finding food or fresh water in ponds and rivers. Some ferrets dunk their heads, others dig, and others step completely into the dish to drink.

It isn’t a behavior to worry about. If it causes a problem for you, replace the water dishes with water bottles. Otherwise, consider getting your ferrets a large dish of water, like a child’s plastic pool, for some water fun.

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