

How Ferrets Age To Perfection

Bob Church discusses the changes to expect in ferrets as they age.

By Bob Church

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Ferret owners can help senior ferrets by paying attention to any small clues that a ferret might need a change to make its life easier.

Changes To Sleep

Older mammals sleep more, and Popeye is no exception. I noticed my older ferrets, including Popeye, favor enclosed sleeping boxes, probably because these are warmer. They also favor softer beds, which makes sense because many older ferrets have arthritis or bone issues.

I gave Popeye his own special bed. I modified a 5-gallon storage box into a nest box by cutting an access hole near the bottom. I added a heating pad and snaked the electrical cord through a small hole cut into the side. I then added a ferret-sized pet waterbed. On cold nights, I turn the heating pad on low, gently heating the waterbed. A reptile heater would also work.

Changes To Social Status

As many ferrets age, their social ranking can shift, usually for the worse. Ferrets that were never picked on when they were young can suddenly become stressed from physical conflict, especially with younger or new ferrets. Some older ferrets also stop enjoying the attention of younger ferrets, becoming grumpy and showing little patience with attempts to initiate play.

Popeye is a textbook example of these changes. Originally the alpha ferret, his social standing slipped as he aged. He is now near the bottom of the social rankings. This caused Popeye a great deal of stress, which increases his risks of gastric ulcers and stress-related disease. I carefully watch how other ferrets interact with him, but, more importantly, I also instituted enrichment-based stress-relief to help protect his health. I also increased the number of secure areas where Popeye can hide to protect himself, such as plastic tubes, nest boxes and cloth sacks.

Changes To Mental Prowess

One of the worst aspects of aging is the deterioration of mental faculties. I haven't really noticed much of this in my personal ferrets, and I suspect that is either because the phenomenon is not extensive in ferrets to begin with, or because my enrichment program prevents it. I have noted some other people's ferrets show a bit of mental confusion, but I am not convinced it is because of age as opposed to undiagnosed insulinoma or some other disease.

I think ferrets of all ages have a great need for mental stimulation, especially those that can't diffuse stress with physical exertion, such as the ill or old. With Popeye, I fill a cardboard box with small exploratory objects of different textures and odors. I also leash him up and go for a walk. Sometimes, all I do is hold and stroke him. The object is to reduce mental stress, so relief really depends on the individual ferret.

Changes To Pain

Older ferrets often show signs of pain, if you watch closely enough, and will adjust their activities to reduce discomfort. When Popeye showed signs of joint pain, we made a trip to the vet for pain-relief advice. Other ferrets might show discomfort when eating (worn teeth or gum disease), walking (spondylosis or osteoporosis), or even when being picked up (abdominal disease). When a ferret stops playing and doesn't want to be picked up, it's a good bet that it is in some degree of discomfort; when you note this, see a veterinarian.

Increasing Bonds

Popeye is at the age when it is hard to predict how many more months he will be around. While his age makes him somewhat of a special-needs ferret, it in no way means that he can't have an enjoyable and meaningful life. Spending a bit more time to enrich and observe those needs only increases the bonds of our relationship. It makes me happier and it makes him happier and healthier. What could be better than that?

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