

Examining Ferrets At Ferretory Time

A ferretory, or annual examination of the mental and physical health of ferrets, helps Bob Church determine future medical needs for his pets.

By Bob Church

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A dental exam is one part of the "ferretory" that Bob Church performs annually on his ferrets.

Once a year I take inventory of my ferrets, not that I think I am missing any. I check out the mental and physical health of each ferret. This is the time when I budget professional health care costs and treatments for each of my ferrets for the upcoming year. I have enough ferrets that they represent a financial time bomb should several become unexpectedly ill at the same time. Also, I am a strong believer in veterinary prophylaxis, so taking "ferretory" allows me to budget veterinary costs over the entire year.

Ferret Mental Health

I start with getting an impression of the ferret's mental state. Mostly, I look for changes in behavior. This year I noted that Popeye was getting reclusive and not exploring much. It turned out Popeye had a cracked canine that was the cause of his change in behavior. From my experience, if you treat your ferrets properly, you have not introduced a new ferret into the group, and there has not been a change in their overall routine, negative changes in behavior almost always signal a change in health. My rule of thumb is: A change in behavior deserves additional investigation.

Not all changes in behavior are due to health problems; some come from past abuse or some other problem. So, I inventory those behaviors I would like to change for the better. At the moment, I don't have many ferrets with behavioral problems, although I am still working with Sampson and Belle to help them interact with other humans better. I would also like to help Belle accept other ferrets and animals without turning into a killing machine.

Ferret Oral Health

Next, I carefully inspect the mouth of every single ferret. I look for signs of gingivitis, periodontal disease, fractured or missing teeth, oral sores, and tumors — anything out of the ordinary. I also make note if a ferret has bad breath or not, and if it is bad, what it smells like (Rotten? Fishy? Eggs? Fruity? Sour? Acidic?). While the occasional ferret might have bad breath for no apparent reason, usually it signals other, more dangerous problems. It could be a sign of dental disease, or perhaps stomach, kidney, liver or pancreatic diseases, so sniffing your ferret's breath can be a good diagnostic tool in deciding if a veterinary visit is warranted.

An effective oral exam can be done a number of ways, but I have found a way that works most of the time. It requires a flexible table lamp, a wooden chopstick and butter (real butter, not margarine). I simply scruff the ferret with my left hand, tuck its pelvis under my left armpit, and rub a bit of butter on its nose. When the ferret licks off the butter, I use the wooden chopstick to hold open its mouth for a dental inspection; the table lamp is used to illuminate the mouth's interior. I rate the condition of the ferret's mouth as 0 (perfect), 1 (good), 2 (OK), 3 (poor), 4 (bad), and 5 (immediate care needed). It is a somewhat subjective evaluation, which is why I do the inspections all at one time. This process allows me to tell which ferret has the worst mouth and needs the first care.

Ferret Overall Physical Health

Afterward, I weigh each ferret and inspect its body. I carefully note fur condition, marking any poorly furred or bald areas on a ferret outline drawing. I have found this technique far better than trying to rely on memory. This isn't just an attempt to jump on the first signs of adrenal disease; it also allows me to monitor changes that could be simply seasonal (rat tail, molt, etc.), stress related (new ferret, change in environment, loss of bonded buddy, etc.) or signs of poor health (poor diet, organ disease, etc.). It also creates a document for veterinary checkups. Last year, Belle was missing fur from her tail and from a small area above her pelvis. This year, her fur coat is perfect.

As I check the fur, I concurrently check for bumps, clumps and lumps. I run my fingers down every part of the ferret's body; if I find anything odd, I mark the location on the outline drawing. For example, Kahlúa has a chordoma at the tip of her tail, which I have monitored for two years; this year it is 5 millimeters larger. Daisy has a small mast cell tumor at the base of her neck, about 2 by 4 millimeters, and is unchanged from last year.

The Ferretory Chart

Once I do the physical inventory, I create my “ferretory chart,” which is nothing more than a one-page, year-at-a-glance calendar. Popeye had the worst mouth, so he was scheduled for a January dental cleaning. Belle is next. I am carefully watching Kinnley for signs of adrenal disease, although in all respects she is doing better this year compared to last. I have added extra enrichment periods to the schedule for Sampson and Belle, which will include more human interaction. Clyde is a bit heavy, so I have scheduled him more floor exploration time, which will be done after a veterinarian has given him a physical to insure his weight gain is not caused by a health condition. His is scheduled for February.

Because I take a yearly ferretory, I can estimate my veterinary bills for much of the year, and adjust office visits so damage to my monthly budget is minimized. It also allows prophylactic treatments, which I have found to be far cheaper than disease treatments. It is an easy thing to do, doesn't take much time, and the ferrets — I think — are better for it.

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Bob Church is a former photojournalist and current zooarcheologist with degrees in biology (zoology) and anthropology (archaeology). He resides in Missouri with 19 ferrets that keep his chicken blender overheated and his heart overfull.