

## The Perfect Ferret Sitter

**The right ferret sitter and proper preparation keep ferrets happy and owners almost worry-free.**

*By Bob Church*

Posted: January 1, 2009, 5 a.m. EST

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Andrew Church often gets the call to ferret-sit for his father's ferrets.

For the last few years, and for at least the next one, I have been involved in ferret research that has required a fair amount of travel. During these journeys, I have been lucky enough to meet with hundreds of ferret owners from around the world. Want to know the most common question I hear? Believe it or not, it is, "Who cares for your ferrets while you are gone?" It is usually coupled with, "How do you train your ferret sitters?"

During 2008, I spent almost six months doing ferret research outside the United States, and 52 days traveling to places in the United States to give talks and have discussions with veterinarians. That was close to eight months away from my ferrets! Like it or not, I've become adept at readying them for others to watch. I am not sure that is a qualification for anything other than loneliness.

Not wanting my ferrets to suffer the same homesickness as me, I generally rely on my son Andrew to take over as surrogate daddy. I think the key to being able to leave your ferrets with a sitter and not to cause undue stress to the ferrets (or the owner) is for the employment of a single trustworthy person for the job. Andrew is my "go-to" guy when I leave my ferrets at home.

### Five Steps To Ferret Sitter Success

Readying my ferrets for my absences takes a bit of planning. I break the task down into five areas of concern: getting the ferrets ready, recording the routine, preparing the environment, preparing the sitter, and follow-up.

1. Getting the ferrets ready is important; ferrets are creatures of habit and change can cause unapproved behaviors. Problems are exacerbated when you take them out of their normal environment. In my experience, bad behaviors are most often associated with major changes in routine and surroundings.

My ferrets are free roamers and do not behave well when caged for long periods of time. Because of this, I try to have my ferret sitters come to my home, but sometimes I have to resort to boarding. When boarding, it seems to make a difference for the ferrets to have some prior experience with the place and new caretaker. So before my trip, I take them on periodic visits to the boarding facility. I also get them used to caging before I leave (which is never taken well). Because I rely on Andrew to such a large degree, I can skip the caging part, which saves a great deal of time and stress.

2. Ferrets seem to thrive in "unroutine routineness." I think ferrets do best when they have an established routine that is not so strict that they know minute by minute what will happen. This is almost unavoidable in boarding, where the clock determines feeding times and exercise, and boredom becomes the rule. Andrew knows the importance of balancing routine with the significance of mixing things up in the daily schedule.

3. The next thing is preparing the environment. I stockpile supplies as much as possible so Andrew is not required to prepare or purchase them while I am gone. This has the added benefit of allowing my ferret sitter more time to interact with the ferrets. Stockpiling litter and kibble is simple, but my ferrets eat chopped chicken and frozen mice, supplemented with chicken gravy. I prepare enough food to last for the duration of my trip and store it in the freezer. Andrew simply lets the ferrets' dinner thaw while he tidies up the play area.

4. Because I go to Andrew so much, my "preparing the sitter" time is quite short. With all my sitters, I have a printed routine for them to follow, detailing such things as amounts, what to feed each ferret, putting the water dish through the dishwasher on a daily basis, medical care and husbandry needs. I print this out on cardboard, laminate it, punch holes in the top, and string the cards on rings to create a "care book" for each individual ferret, as well as the group. Each page has a photo of the ferret so that there is no misunderstanding as to who is who. Because my ferrets free roam, I use food color to identify closely matched sables and albinos. I also physically show ferret sitters exactly how to do certain things so I know there will be a continuity of care. Finally, I point out the troublemakers and nippers: which ferrets to watch and what to watch out for.

5. Finally, I follow up with a ferret sitter while I am away. I have to be a bit careful not to invoke a feeling of mistrust, you can lose a sitter that way. I rarely ask if the ferrets are doing well, but rather ask about supplies and the like, allowing the conversation to drift toward individual ferrets in a natural and unaggressive manner. I guess the point is if you don't trust your sitter, you shouldn't be leaving your ferrets with him or her in the first place. I have found that a sitter having a feeling of trust is generally more responsible than one that is mistrusted. My periodic inquiries are to instill a feeling of trust in my sitter as much as they are to reduce my own fears.

The most important part of follow-up occurs after I return home. The ferret sitter and I discuss each individual ferret so I know if anything has changed or if something needs to be done. I also take this time to reward the sitter, in excess of the agreed payment, for their care of my ferrets. I usually have a small gift in hand that is appropriate for the length of service; my ferrets are worth good care, and good care needs to be rewarded and appreciated.

#### What Makes A Great Ferret Sitter

As mentioned, my son Andrew does a great deal of my ferret sitting and I cannot express the degree of appreciation I have for his efforts. During my extended research trip, he spent six months caring for my floor monkeys, including caring for Kinnley, a ferret that had adrenal surgery just before I left. Andrew not only insured her recovery, but also became her good friend. Not everyone is as fortunate as I am in regards to having a trusted ferret sitter, but Andrew isn't my only one. Other members of my family and friends help to fill in when Andrew is not available. I think the key to my success is not just in the selection of a ferret sitter, but also in my preparation. I think good preparation makes good sitters, and trust makes them great. At least it does with Andrew.

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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.