

Resource Saving Tips for Ferret Owners, Focus On Bedding

Bob Church offers tips to help ferret owners conserve bedding resources.

By Bob Church

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Ferret Rocko/Courtesy Candice Moanaw

The right type of ferret bedding can last longer with proper care.

As a continuation of the resource-saving tips posted in September 2011, this column focuses on ways to conserve resources not previously mentioned. Every dollar saved is one that can be applied to better ferret food, vet bills or many other expenses.

Saving Bedding

Better Quality: Ferrets require bedding. Ferrets destroy bedding. The two are mutually inclusive — if you give ferrets something soft and fluffy to sleep in, they will eventually obliterate it. It is what ferrets do.

The first step to extending the life of bedding is to purchase high-quality, well-sewn products. As tempted as you might be, select durability over aesthetic appeal, because the ferrets couldn't care less if their hammock is dull brown or brightly flowered (unless you plan on improvements after you get home). Look for scratch-resistant fabrics with high thread counts, sewn with heavy-duty thread, seams with more stitches per inch, and double sewn in areas of potential heavy wear, such as interior corners or access openings. Especially important are the sewing quality of interior corners and the durability of the interior fabric, because this is where most of the heavy scratching and wear takes place. If the ferret spots a light-leak (see below), it will dig at it with feverish intensity, so quality saves money.

Better Quality Ferret Bedding Pro: Quality bedding lasts longer; ferrets have difficulty creating holes that could entrap or harm them.

Better Quality Ferret Bedding Con: Higher initial cost; might be more difficult to find.

Improve Quality: Sometimes bedding is a gift or has a pattern that cannot be resisted. If you have the skills — or know someone with the skills — then a great solution is to simply take the bedding home and improve the quality on your own. You probably only have to work on the parts needing improvement, such as seams or corners, but you might notice light leaks or poor grommets that need fixing. My favorite fix is to add an interior liner to slow internal wear.

Improve Ferret Bedding Quality Pro: Quality improved; increased life of bedding; can allow the purchase of lower-quality items.

Improve Ferret Bedding Quality Con: Time and cost of improvements.

Clip Nails: Ferrets use their claws when shredding bedding, mostly used to dig "just a bit deeper" into their sleeping den, but sometimes when obsessing over a light-leak. Even with high thread count fabrics, sharp claws puncture the finest of textiles and initiate an interior flaw that ferrets fixate upon for the rest of the bedding's life. They will claw at holes incessantly, regardless of size. This cannot be stopped, but it can be slowed down by blunting the ferret's nails. An additional benefit is that clipped claws have less risk for becoming snagged on fabrics.

Clip Ferret Nails Pro: Harder to dig objects; safer to human skin; prolongs life of bedding; reduces risks of the ferret's nail becoming snagged.

Clip Ferret Nails Con: Time to inspect and cut the claws.

Fabric Chewing: One reason — of many — that ferrets chew bedding is because they really have nothing else to do. Ferrets are intelligent animals and even the best environments can become stale and uninteresting if they remain static. Sometimes boredom can manifest itself in stereotypical behavior, which, unfortunately, can include fabric chewing. Fabric chewing can wear down teeth at astonishingly rapid rates, and swallowed threads could contribute to intestinal blockages, so it is not a good thing regardless of how it affects bedding. Once a ferret habitually chews fabric, it is extremely difficult to convince it to stop; the best strategy is to prevent fabric chewing from starting.

The most effective solution for fabric chewing is to simply remove all fabrics. You can replace bedding with other materials, such as paper strips, fresh hay or some other material. I find paper strips most effective for fabric-chewing addicts. This generally cures the problem, although it is far messier than a hammock bag. Another solution is to soak the bedding in a nasty-tasting substance, such as bitter apple or hot sauce. This might work, but I worry noxious materials could get in the eyes or cause skin irritation.

Perhaps not as effective as removing fabrics, but far better for the ferret is to initiate an enrichment program that physically and intellectually engages the little guy. I recommend doing an enrichment search within the online version of Ferrets Magazine; there is a tremendous amount of information on enrichment there that would be extremely useful.

Minimize Ferret Fabric Chewing Pro: Helps reduce stereotypic behaviors; helps in human-ferret bonding; protects ferret teeth from excessive wear; saves money spent replacing bedding.

Minimize Ferret Fabric Chewing Con: Some stereotypic behaviors are next to impossible to stop; some bedding materials (paper strips, paper toweling, hay, etc.) can be messy or expensive; alternative bedding can increase clean-up time; some materials are a fire hazard.

Light-Leak Equals Destruction: A light-leak is an area in a sleep sack or other sack-like bedding where light can be seen against the darkness. It doesn't have to be much; in the darkness of a sleep sack, even a dim light leak stands out in contrast to the darker background. This can occur in poor-quality bedding where the seams are not light tight, the batting is uneven, or where the fabric is worn or torn. Inside the bag, ferrets see the brighter area and start to investigate, which is a siren call to an animal designed to live underground much of the time. The bright spot of light seems to stimulate a ferret's natural curiosity and burrowing behaviors, and it will compulsively dig at the fabric or the seams until a hole is formed. Sometimes a ferret crawls through the hole and become entangled in the fabric layers, but mostly it just destroys the bedding. If the light-leak is a worn spot in the fabric, it can have a different texture that exacerbates the problem.

If the light-leak is along a seam, a pass through a sewing machine can help, but if the leak is from a worn area, fixing it is beyond my skill and I just replace the bedding. However, I know people who turn the sack inside out, repair or replace the clawed area, and continue using it for bedding. It also helps to place bedding inside a nest box, in a darkened corner of the cage. This reduces light levels and helps diminish the influence of a light leak.

Eliminate Light-Leaks In Ferret Bedding Pro: Preventing light-leaks extends the life of bedding; prevents ferrets from exploring fabric layers and becoming entrapped; ferrets like darker sleeping areas.

Eliminate Light-Leaks In Ferret Bedding Con: Bedding inspection time; cost of quality bedding; time-costs for repairs and maintenance.

Repair or Retire Immediately: Defects in bedding are ferret "attention magnets." Inspect all bedding prior to use for wear, tears, light-leaks and loose seams; I do it immediately after removing it from the dryer. Temporarily retire wounded bedding to the mending basket until it can be repaired. Bedding too damaged for repair should be permanently retired to prevent entrapment or accidental injury.

Ferret Bedding Maintenance Pro: Mending bedding extends its life; saves money and resources; prevents injuries.

Ferret Bedding Maintenance Con: Time spent in repairs; can require investment in extra bedding.

Sew Your Own: While beyond my skills, some people opt to sew their own ferret bedding to save money or to increase durability beyond normal standards. I once had a determined and dedicated digger who clawed through sleep sacks faster than I could replace them. I asked a seamstress friend to make a pocketed hammock with a tight-weave canvas interior, thick cotton batting quilted inside black velvet, and a denim exterior, using stainless steel grommets for hanging, triple seams throughout, and multiple passes in the corners. It lasted Moose for the final four years of his life, although he made a rigorous effort to dig through it most of that time, and I still use it.

Sew Your Own Ferret Bedding Pro: Inexpensive; can create specific-needs bedding.

Sew Your Own Ferret Bedding Con: Time consuming; requires sewing skills.

Wash Gently: All bedding becomes soiled, either through use or by accident. Soiled bedding can attract pests or simply make a stink. In a great number of cases where people have complained about odor, I was able to trace it back to stinky bedding, saturated with the ferret's oily fur and skin secretions. It can become rather pungent if the ferret is concurrently suffering from ear mites, or is in heat or rut. Odor is not the only concern; I live in an area filled with fleas, chiggers and ticks, all of which can be brought inside after ferrets have been out playing. My policy is to launder all bedding at least once a week, but remove soiled bedding immediately. I wash in cold water with a cold-water detergent, use bleach sparingly, and use the gentle cycle whenever possible. This may or may not extend the life of the bedding — I am no laundry expert — but it at least saves money by conserving hot water.

Wash Ferret Bedding Carefully Pro: Saves money heating water; might prolong bedding life; reduces odors; helpful in parasite control.

Wash Ferret Bedding Carefully Con: More frequent laundering can cost more; more time washing bedding.

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