

Sampson and The Infamous Biting Incident

Sometimes a bite from a ferret can be a good thing.

By Bob Church

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It took some time, but Sampson now trusts people and enjoys his play time.

Ferrets have brought a lot into my life; more than I ever expected and certainly more than I could have imagined. Because of ferrets, I have traveled around the United States and the world, met ferret people from many lands, and seen the absolute best humans can offer. Ferret people like to say that they are the most passionate and loyal pet owners in the world, and I suspect it would be foolish to argue.

On a personal level, I think a lot of benefits to being a ferret owner never make it into the public area. One of those benefits is so intangible that it is nearly impossible to explain. I received such a benefit from Sampson, a sweet yellow ferret with a cute, little, pink nose.

Sampson Set Free

Sampson is a large boy, perhaps 2 years old or so, and one of a group of hundreds of ferrets liberated from a ferret breeder in Ohio last year in a rescue spearheaded by Lori Sies. The first year or two of Sampson's life was spent in a small cage that was filled beyond capacity with other ferrets. He only experienced wire floors and never understood what it was like to be able to run or climb or dance or explore. These are the things that delight a ferret; the real expressions of "ferretness."

When I first met Sampson, it was hardly a score of days since his release from confinement. He was being given an antibiotic for an infection under his eye, and a few of his toes were mysteriously missing. Although he was perhaps one of the most timid ferrets I had ever met, he was also very friendly; he and I took to each other right away. There was something about the golden lug that I couldn't resist. He also seemed to take to me, melting into my arms and carefully watching the other people in the room. Sometimes the correct thing to do is to listen to your heart. I asked to adopt the yellow monkey.

In my home, new ferrets are always kept separate from the others for two to four weeks. This allows them time to get used to me, to learn about my feeding and care regimen, to control fleas and ear mites, and to make sure they are not carrying some disease that could hurt the other ferrets. It also allows the new ferret to decompress and regain a feeling of security before dumping it into a group of strangers, some of whom are likely to want to bite, or to try to exclude it. It takes longer, but I feel it is better for all concerned, so the time and effort are worth it to me.

Sampson was no different. My vet and I weren't exactly sure what the infection under his eye was all about, and I wanted to make sure no ferrets were slimed by the nasty little bugs, so "Golden Boy" was quarantined. That made it simple to notice Sampson's behavior was clearly different when compared to other ferrets, and this worried me.

Earning Sampson's Trust

Sampson would not walk across a room — he slinked against the wall and took cover under things. If I tried to pick up Sampson, he spun his head around as if he wanted to bite, but he never put his teeth on me. Loud noises scared him so much that when one occurred he lost control of his bowels, cowered and refused to come out. He seemed stuck in the "explore" mode — ferrets like to explore the room before they play, and Sampson seemed to never get past the need to explore.

While I am old, I am also immature, so my sense of "extended childhood" refused to allow me to give in on the subject of play. It took almost an entire week for me to convince Sampson to come out from under the couch. He lay just under the edge and watched everything that went on. He never once tried to participate. Each day I plopped down on the floor next to him and whispered, it didn't matter what I said. The only thing of importance was Sampson hearing the sound of my voice. I offered him tidbits of food. After a while, Sampson expected this hand feeding, and I was able to coax him out. Each day, Sampson traveled farther and farther from the security of the couch.

Maybe three weeks into this routine, I was lying on the floor watching a DVD movie when I suddenly realized something

was nipping my ankle. While I am old and immature, I am also sometimes forgetful, and in such a senior moment I forgot Sampson was in the room and I jumped, startled. A shooting star of a ferret whipped by me and plunged under the couch. I rolled over and whispered an apology, but Sampson would have nothing of it.

Sampson puffed up his hair, stood on the toes of his front paws, opened his mouth, and bit me! It was lightning fast, over in a millisecond. Most important, after the bite Sampson did something I had never seen before. He started dancing, ran forward to nip me a second time, and then dashed around, inviting me to chase him. I was flabbergasted! Not wanting to scare him, I spider-crawled my hand toward him. He took the bait. Within seconds, I was wrestling a dooking, 4-pound yellow mustelid that wanted nothing more than to drag me under the edge of the sofa.

Sampson's Breakthrough

Sampson danced. Sampson leapt. Sampson bounced around the room and attacked anything on the floor. Sampson had become a real ferret. Not long after this breakthrough, my son Andrew visited and asked when I got the "new" ferret. He was so used to seeing Sampson hide under the couch that he didn't realize the bouncing boy tearing up the draft blocker was the same little ferret. Andrew then noticed that I had a few drops of blood on my nose, and asked what that was all about.

I said that it was a medal of honor. With a single nip, Sampson told me that we were friends, that he could trust me, and he knew how to play. Since then, Sampson has turned into one of the most loving ferrets I have ever owned. He plays constantly, is friends with the other ferrets in the house, and is the first to run over for a wrestle with anyone that comes through the front door.

In other words, Sampson is a ferret. A big, yellow oaf of a ferret that stole my heart with a single, gentle, lightning-fast nip to my nose. That wasn't just a playful bite; it was an expression of healing. It warmed my heart and thrilled my soul. It was one of those fringe benefits of ferret ownership that is rarely discussed in ferret books. It is a secret payment to the heart.

I need a T-shirt that says, "Fueled by high-octane ferret love."

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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.