

## A Ferret Named Clyde & Water Therapy

**Bob Church tries water therapy to help an injured ferret named Clyde regain its strength.**

*By Bob Church*

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Is your ferret a candidate for water therapy or water play?

Many of my ferrets — most actually — come to me from rescues or shelters. This means many of them have had homes before mine, many have become accustomed to ways of living different than my own. Some may have been abused or neglected in one way or another. Many are also some of the sweetest and most gentle ferrets I have ever encountered. Clyde fits in with all of those observations, having been delivered to a Maryland shelter (Barbara Clay's Rocky's Ferret Rescue and Shelter) in a dreadful manner: with broken back legs and pelvis. Having looked at the original X-rays, it is obvious that however the accident occurred (assuming it was an accident), Clyde would have serious physical therapy needs.

### The Trouble With Clyde

Barb and her volunteers did a magnificent job nursing Clyde. By the time I welcomed him to my home, Clyde had healed enough to walk on his own — although it was clear he had some difficulty and perhaps pain. I noted he had a very difficult time climbing onto objects that would normally be prime ferret perches, such as the tops of boxes and seats. Nor could he easily climb stairs; he would tire and just watch the other ferrets bouncing by. Coming down the stairs was much easier, as long as you define falling from step to step as “easier.” He wanted desperately to join in the ferret Olympiad that took place in my living room each evening, but just could not keep up.

The questions were how much could be done to make his back end stronger, what could be done to reduce whatever pain might be associated with those injuries, and how could I increase his exercise levels without harming him further? I spent considerable time researching options, but then a simple accident lead me to at least one answer that seemed to work.

### An Idea For Water Therapy

The accident occurred to me. I was carrying my 4 by 5 camera up a gully and slipped, sprawling out on the ground and landing on my hip. I had a deep bruise and some torn muscles and ligaments, so my doctor suggested physical therapy to work through the resulting pain and loss of mobility. When I dutifully reported to the little lady in charge of my masochistic rehabilitation (I swear I thought she was carrying a whip), I was taken to a room that largely consisted of a swimming pool and people who were — like me — madly searching for a route of escape. Basically, I was supposed to walk back and forth through warm water to rehabilitate my hip. Well, not all, because that little physical therapist did her best to dislocate my leg during each visit, and I think that she came close on several occasions.

Once, during those rare intervals when I was not screaming in agony for divine deliverance, I asked if the treatment I was enduring could work with four-legged species. I was told the water therapy would work; the therapist mentioned she had used a similar technique to help her cat. I thought I would give it a try with Clyde. The problem was, Clyde did not like baths, wet floors, pools of water or anything that remotely resembled them.

### Clyde Braves The Water

I started out with a light play period where I would move Clyde's legs through their range of motion. This usually got him quite worked up, so I allowed him to bounce and play, figuring the activity would approximate the appropriate exercise. When Clyde started to settle down, I placed a treat on a dish, then placed the dish in the middle of a cookie tray. I then carefully poured warm water in the cookie tray so that Clyde had to get his feet wet to get to the treat. I experimented with treats and found he was bonkers over barbeque chicken. It worked!

During the next few weeks, Clyde went from the tray to the bathtub, where I used the same treat lure, but gradually started to raise the level of the water in the tub until Clyde was swimming. I continued to use warm water. After a while, I placed the treat on small bathtub ducks, which I floated in the water. I placed a small plastic box filled with gravel at one end so he could climb out of the water if he wished.

Each time I gave Clyde water therapy, I supported his belly with one hand and petted him with the other as I slowly lowered him in the water. Once in the water, I allowed him to swim to objects at will as he searched for his small treats.

As his fear of the water diminished and his enjoyment increased, I lengthened the time of the swimming exercise. After several months, Clyde could — and would — swim for nearly a half hour.

I then started placing Clyde on a leash and taking him outside. We walked about a tenth of a mile, rested and returned home. Gradually increasing the distance, we topped out walking two miles every other day. After six months, Clyde stopped improving, and after a vet visit and X-rays, we decided that his current condition was the best it was going to get. We planned to do yearly X-rays to monitor Clyde's hips (the broken femurs healed well), and we would take appropriate steps should the need arise.

#### Water Play Storms The Household

What I didn't consider was that I created a water monster. Bathtubs, sinks and toilets were all fair game to Clyde. He runs at the sound of a shower and dances in front of the sliding glass door when it rains. Clyde loves warm summer rains, leaping and jumping and biting at the raindrops. Interestingly, the other ferrets — many of which never learned the fun of water play — followed Clyde's lead and spontaneously started to play in the water themselves. Soon a whole new category of enrichment was born at my house — water play. The ferrets now get some type of water play at least twice a week, and with a few grumpy exceptions, all love the experience.

It goes without saying that I am neither a veterinarian nor a physical therapist. Please consult your vet prior to starting any physical therapy on your own ferret!

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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.