

Beyond Ferrets: Ferret Symposia

Bob Church ponders the rewards of attending ferret symposia.

By Bob Church

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Yes, people learn a lot of useful information about ferrets at a ferret symposium, but they also make lasting friendships.

I wanted this column to be about the International Ferret Congress Ferret Symposium recently held in Pittsburgh. That event was at the beginning of November — when this column was due — and yet this has been one of the hardest columns I have had to write. I believe ferret symposia are more than a collection of events. My difficulty is trying to explain the importance of symposia and why people should attend.

A Bias Revealed

I won't lie to you; I love meeting ferret people and their pets. I am not sure which part I like better — meeting the ferrets or their owners. Since both are high up on the scale, there is little chance that I will miss an opportunity to combine the two at a single event. Ferret shows of various types, seminars, symposiums, and meetings are all eagerly anticipated in the hopes of meeting yet more ferrets and their human counterparts.

Therefore, I am probably not the right person to ask about the pleasures of attending ferret events, especially ferret symposia. I might be considered somewhat biased on the subject.

Eight years ago I attended and spoke at the first symposium in Toronto, organized by the delightful Randy Belair. Since then I have attended and lectured at every ferret symposium, including one in Australia (2008), two in Holland (2004, 2006), a second one in Toronto (2006), and American symposia in Las Vegas (2002), Atlanta (2003), St. Louis (2005), and Portland (2007).

A Symposium That Couldn't Be Missed

It was understandable, perhaps, that I was more than a bit upset at the prospect of missing the Pittsburgh symposium. I had just spent a tremendous sum of money doing ferret research, was way behind in a number of important tasks, had a couple of family issues, and had suffered a flare in a chronic medical condition. I had already missed two ferret shows and I had resigned myself to missing my first ferret symposium. It left me with a deep feeling of melancholy.

Enter Kim Schilling, author of *Ferrets for Dummies*. Kim and I are close friends and have been so for more than a decade. Kim, with the assistance of Dr. Susan Brown and others, took great care of me when I suffered food poisoning at the Portland symposium. I also count her husband and son as part of my own family. Kim decided I was not going to miss the symposium and contacted the IFC to see if they would make an exception and allow me to attend even though the cut-off date was well past. She arranged lodging and even took the time to drive me out to the symposium in her van. My attendance at the symposium was entirely because of Kim.

Ferret Friendships

So, why is this story important? Because this tale is one that is not unusual to hear at ferret symposia. This type of "ferret friendship" is the norm rather than the exception, and if the IFC had a praise page that documented such deeds, it would be impressively long.

Now, before anyone suggests Kim's good deed was unusual, recall I mentioned my bout with food poisoning. I was scheduled to give two talks in Portland, but the powerful effects of the illness left me tied to that small cubicle inside my hotel room. Speakers willingly gave up their times so that I could recover before talking. Attendees visited to cheer me up or offer to get me something, and there was a constant stream of people at my door to check on me. The IFC staff was more than helpful in their efforts to make it easier for me to speak and attend as much of the events as possible. My friend Joel even took over my task to visit the local zoo and guide symposium attendants through the displays. It wasn't one or two people; it was dozens, and what was done for me has been done for scores of other people at every symposium I have attended, which has been, well, all of them.



And that is why attendance at local and national ferret events is so important. There is a realization for many that the sum of the whole is far greater than the sum of the individuals. It is like the energy of the group grows to become an entity of its own, nurturing and caring for the participants. It is more than the opportunities for educational advancement. It is more than the chance to meet ferret experts face-to-face and pick their brains. It is even more than the altruistic desire to return home with information that could help ferrets live longer and better. It is to become part of a sense of community.

Join The Ferret Community

Communities are not homogeneous. They are composed of a number of different voices, each with their own opinions and insights. Communities are not extensions of the business world. They are far more catholic, with a shared, common interest held above that of the individual. Communities are not in agreement. Their strength radiates from differing solutions opined from a wide pool of knowledge. Communities are not tidy. They are a seething mass of participants bouncing, leaping and rushing about — in many ways nothing more than a reflection of the pet they hold so cheerfully to their heart.

Communities do not exist for the individual, yet perhaps their most beautiful expression is when they stop to lend assistance to the one. And my friends, that is the importance of a sense of community, which is why supporting clubs, publications, and yes, even ferret symposia, are so vitally important. They erase the boundaries between us and make us part of something transcendent and beautiful.

That is how we help our ferrets to live longer and healthier lives.

I've given a lot of ferret advice over the last decade or so, but this one delightful tidbit is expressly for those who have never attended a ferret event or symposium: GO! You will, perhaps, find more enrichment at the larger events, but all of them hold value. Become part of the greater ferret community. You will make a difference.

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