

Two Ferrets, Two Ways To Explore The Outdoors

Fair weather allows ferrets to explore the outdoors, on their own terms.

By Alexandra Sargent-Colburn

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Spring has finally come to New England! People tend to think of fall as our most beautiful season, but I disagree. Yes, the jeweled foliage displays are gorgeous, but there is just something so hopeful and vital about the little shoots and sprouts that push their way up through the gritty soil when the days lengthen. The new leaves are all so tender and precious on the trees. Think tulips, daffodils, narcissus, hyacinths, apple blossoms, lilacs, the yellow hanging catkins on birches, the bright green puffs of new needles on evergreens. The world smells fresh and wonderful and renewed.

It is time, of course, for ferrets to go and play outside after long months of winter! (You knew I'd get around to ferrets eventually, didn't you? Of course you did.)

Yes, outside. Not running around by themselves but safely snapped into their H-harnesses, with 8-foot leashes. My ferret Caff-Pow's set is blue, Todd's is red. And they look terribly cute "suited up" like that.

They have very different approaches to the great outdoors. Todd has been (in my opinion) adversely affected by life in the cage. He becomes very worried if there is open space above him. He does enjoy forays outside, but only if he can walk beneath towering shrubs or overhanging clumps of grasses and foliage. He needs to be "hidden" from the sky.

Under those constraints Todd has a blast outside! He loves to dig in the soft, muddy banks of the little stream that runs along the edge of my front yard. The stream is shaded by thick stands of high bush blueberry. Right now the bushes are losing their clusters of tiny, ivory, bell-shaped blossoms. With a little luck, there will be a heavy crop of berries in August. Right now, the spent blossoms fall into the water with every puff of breeze and travel downstream to the pond. I have noticed that they have a tendency to stick to the ribs of wet ferrets. I have to pick them off, like so many barnacles. Todd doesn't seem to mind them at all. He does hate tangling his leash up in the berry bushes and having to be rescued. Well, rescuing him isn't much fun, either. But it is for a good cause. He emerges from these sessions sodden and muddy, but also supremely pleased with the world in general.

Caff-Pow has a completely different way of behaving outside, and I generally separate the two boys into two distinct play sessions as a result. I let Todd tire himself out first, then I return him to the house and bring out Caff-Pow.

Caff-Pow isn't the least put off by the sky. He just wants to get out there and run! He gallops the length of our hard-packed dirt road at the end of his leash, then turns left and travels along the asphalt road until he gets to the shores of the big pond. Generally there are a lot of stops along the way because my neighbors get such a kick out of seeing him out and about. They know him by name. He has to stop and get petted a few times before he gets to the pond.

Caff-Pow dearly loves the little sandy beach by the pond and the adjacent woods. The wetter the better for him. Wading in up to his knees, tail raised to keep it dry, he is one happy weasel. Digging in the coarse sand is another favorite, as is walking up to the edge of the woods over a moist stretch of hairy, carnivorous sun dews and mowed-flat cranberries. The woods itself? A ferret playground! Dry leaves to scuffle in, dry brush to catch your leash in. Wonderful smells. Rotting logs to swarm over. What more could a ferret want, except for a few crunchy bugs to eat?

I think my favorite outing with Caff-Pow was when a father and daughter on the water in their canoe saw him cavorting on the beach from a distance, and the father yelled "Miss, can my little girl see your skunk?" Much paddling followed, and a biology lesson, too! Another ferret fan was created that day. And a very, very tired and happy ferret had to be carried home back to his hammy, cradled safely in my arms. I didn't mind the mud on my shirt, not at all!

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Alexandra Sargent-Colburn lives in Massachusetts with fish, ferrets, a cat, a husband and a neurotic dog. The ferrets are in charge.

