

The Development Of A Perfect Ferret Food

The development of ferret-specific food addressed previously ignored nutritional needs of ferrets.

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Ferret-specific food is a relatively recent development and is formulated to meet the needs of the carnivorous ferret.

Food is vital for living creatures, but it wasn't long ago that some people viewed ferret food merely as something to fill up the animals rather than provide nutrients to promote optimum health.

Within the last 15 years or so, however, nutritionists, researchers and manufacturers have labored long hours researching the nutritional needs of ferrets. Today owners have many healthy choices to choose from when deciding what to feed their pets.

Before Ferret-Specific Food

Many years ago, before ferrets were ever domesticated, they existed by feasting on what they could find in nature to fulfill what their bodies required to survive. Ferret-food manufacturers took some lessons from nature in the development of their foods.

"Ferrets are carnivores, they need fresh meat," said Peter Reid, president of Marshall Pet Products.

Don Haukom, vice president of Pretty Bird International Inc. said that, "Ferrets are designed to be fed rodents, that's what they were specific for."

Ferret food manufacturers recognize that when ferrets were wild, a whole-prey diet was the rule. "A ferret diet generally consisted of rabbits, small mammals, mollusks arthropods, bird's eggs, and just about whatever ferrets could catch," said Ronald Reid, a zoologist/nutritionist and director, technical services for Sun Seed Company.

Early Ferret Diets

Once humans realized that ferrets could make great pets, ferrets found they no longer had to fend for themselves at dinnertime. In the early days, however, people didn't know much about what ferrets needed nutritionally and, even if they did, not all ferrets got what they needed.

"Early captive ferret diets going back to the 1940s even suggested ferrets could be kept on bread and milk diets," Ronald Reid said. "During that time, it was suggested to feed small bones to prevent periodontal problems."

Not all ferret caretakers bought into that nonsense. Some stuck to a ferret's true natural diet, and saw the animals flourish.

"We've been breeding ferrets since 1939 and there used to be a lot more fresh meat available, so we fed predominately a moist mixture of meat from the packing houses," Peter Reid said. "That was way, way back and that is how it was done back then."

Even some ferrets owners began to find that feeding foods more closely related to what a ferret would find in nature had a positive effect.

"As knowledge and experience with ferrets in captivity was gained, more foods were offered to ferrets such as ground fish, poultry waste, horse meat and cooked starch and fats," Ronald Reid said. "However, that is not a pleasant diet to make and rather odoriferous, wet waste is difficult to get rid of in cages."

Those trying to adhere to the nutritional needs of ferrets started to realize that with the popularity of ferrets on the rise, a need for ferret and owner-friendly food was required.

"Through the ages," Peter Reid said, "there was a need for more of a cleaner presentation, especially as breeding went from the outdoors to the indoor facility. There was a need to have a pelletized ration for ferrets."

As this need arose, many owners turned to feeding their ferrets dry cat food, kitten food or even dog food. "In early

attempts people would use modified kitten or cat food,” Peter Reid said. “But most formulations are designed for the digestion of cats.”

This is an important difference because, according to Reid, it takes most cats five to eight hours to digest their food, while it takes a ferret two to three hours. “Something was needed to break down much more rapidly in their systems,” said Peter Reid.

And ferrets nutritional needs are different as well. “Ferrets require higher protein and fat because they are really high energy animals,” said Gail Shepard, senior marketing manager for ZuPreem.

Tom R. Willard, president and CEO of Performance Foods Inc. holds a Ph.D. in animal nutrition/biochemistry, and he stresses that just because a ferret can eat a food doesn’t mean that it should eat that food. “There is no cat food on the market that, without some type of fine-tuning or supplementation, will support a ferret life over a period of time. It’s a scientific fact.”

Scientific facts are what led researchers and developers to come up with ferret foods that not only met the nutritional needs of ferrets, but also the convenience wants of owners.

“Part of loving your pet is wanting it to have a good, healthy life with longevity,” Haukom said. “People try to understand the causes and consequences and change a diet to address some of the problems. Most of animal nutrition science comes from passion. People are passionate about the needs of the pets.”