

Ferret Grooming Through The Years

The future of ferret grooming is fresh and clean as ferret owners learn more about grooming and new grooming products become available.

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Current prevailing opinion calls for ferrets to be bathed infrequently, perhaps a few times a year.

Common sense says that washing keeps things clean. The definition of clean may vary slightly to everyone, but most people agree that when something is clean it doesn't have an odor. That may be a good general definition, but it doesn't apply to ferrets.

The frequency at which ferrets are bathed is the biggest change that has occurred in ferret grooming through the years. Before one click of the mouse could net thousands of Internet pages filled with ferret information, new owners learned as they went — and often made mistakes in the process.

"I think that just about every aspect of ferret care has changed in the last 20 years," said Mary McCarty-Houser, director of the Pennsylvania Ferret Rescue Association of Centre County. "While some folks, longtime breeders/owners in the U.K., have been doing the right thing all along, many of us were really off course over here in the U.S."

Less Is More

Many first-time ferret owners are taken aback by the ferret's natural scent. When ferrets were in the early stages of being domesticated, some people believed the odor meant the animal wasn't clean. Longtime ferret owners admit they used to bathe their pets way too much.

"Years ago folks used to bathe their ferrets a lot more often than was needed, as they thought it helped control odor," McCarty-Houser said. "Now we know that bathing more frequently actually increases odor, so bathing went from a weekly recommendation to no more than once a month — and often less than that."

"I do not recommend routine bathing," said Anne K. G. Bazilwich, DVM, Grand Isle Veterinary Hospital, Grand Isle, Virginia. "Instead, I suggest frequent laundering of the ferret's bedding and immaculate litter box hygiene to reduce odor. It is OK to bathe ferrets a few times per year."

Kym Costanzo, vice president of the Pennsylvania Ferret Club & Shelter in Pottstown, Pennsylvania and ferret owner of more than 20 years explained the problem behind frequent bathing. "The more often you bathe, the more it will strip the oils from your ferret's skin, and to compensate for the lack of oils, they will over-produce. That will increase the natural scent of a ferret, not reduce it."

For years, ferret sprays and deodorants have addressed the problem of ferret odor. Vickie McKimmey, breeder and ferret owner of 20 years in Lewistown, Maryland, and director of shows and special events for the American Ferret Association, has seen improvements.

"There are some new fragrance sprays on the market that are much nicer and lighter now," she said. "A lot of the older ferret freshening sprays were too heavy and irritating. I am a ferret judge, and I hate having a ferret come through the ring reeking of a ferret freshener spray."

Ferrets have an odor to them and even the best grooming routine is not going to change that. Ferrets need to be routinely groomed and cared for, but while they may be your babies, they will never smell like one. "Ferrets should smell like ferrets, at least they should smell like clean ferrets," McKimmey said.

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Educating The Masses

Years ago, with little ferret-specific advice or products, many owners weren't exactly sure what ferret grooming should



entail or how to go about it. Years of learning now brings an increasing amount of ferret-specific merchandise.

“There is much more information available now and also a number of different products and items designed just for ferrets,” said Ann Barzda of New Jersey, a ferret owner of 16 years. “I’m happy to see companies catering to ferret owners.”

The industry is changing to focus more on care, maintenance and how to take care of a pet ferret, according to Judy Breton, a national grooming specialist and western sales manager for Tomlyn, a pet product manufacturer in Buena, New Jersey. Breton believes the changes are due to education. “What has happened in the industry is there are more products specifically labeled for ferrets.”

Access to proper information provides the tools individuals need to properly care for ferrets. “What I’ve seen over the last few years, particularly two or three years ago, is we noticed a very large uptick in the amount of grooming supplies we’re selling, and I think a lot of it just has to do with education,” said Mike Liseno, vice president of Marshall Pet Products in Walcott, New York.

Many retailers now offer special ferret sections in the stores instead of a general small animal section, and it has its benefits. “We used to see small animal sections in the stores that had the wire brush used for rabbits and people didn’t realize you couldn’t use that on a ferret, that ferrets have a more bristle-type brush,” Liseno said.

Now, with ferret sections, customers can easily find grooming products without having to guess if something designed for another animal will work. “It’s having the right products for ferrets in the ferret section instead of small animal,” Liseno said.

The Future

New ferret grooming products are catering to the needs of younger ferret owners, as ferret keeping and care is beginning at a much earlier age.

“Before it was mostly older people, predominately females in college through their early 30s, and now we’re seeing more parents buying ferrets for younger children,” Liseno said.

SuperPet offers a line of grooming tool products for ferrets in animal shapes. “These products were designed to be child-friendly to encourage responsible pet ownership among children and include directions and tips for proper ferret grooming on the packaging,” said Jason Casto, director of marketing and product development for Super Pet in Elk Grove Village, Illinois.

The response has been positive. “The market liked that we focused on products designed to encourage kids to be active and responsible in the pet ownership process,” he said.

Tearless shampoos also aid young caretakers in becoming comfortable with grooming. “We came up with a no-tears formulation because we know when kids bathe a ferret they’re doing it a little differently than the adults,” Liseno said. No-tears formula shampoos make the experience more pleasant for younger owners and pets.

Jennifer Mons McLaughlin lives in Minnesota and has been writing about the pet industry for more than 10 years.