

## Ferrets and Fish Tank Safety

**Fish and ferrets live in separate worlds, and for the safety of both, those worlds should never meet.**

*By Audrey Pavia*

Ferrets are curious creatures that are captivated by just about anything that moves. This is particularly true of small things that could potentially be considered prey.

People who keep both fish and ferrets have observed that ferrets can sometimes take notice of fish swimming in aquariums within the ferret's domain. After all, fish are colorful, move quickly and are living in a tank full of bubbly water. What's not to notice?

The problems that can arise when ferrets get interested in a tank full of fish can include drinking the water (unhealthy), knocking the aquarium over (disastrous) and dining on the fish (tragic). Whatever trouble a ferret may get into when fish are around, it can't be good for the fish or the ferret.

### Ferret Interest

Whether or not a ferret even cares about fish is a question of individual personality. While some ferrets are obsessed with fish, others could care less. Some have only a mild curiosity, while others are hell bent on getting to the bottom of that bubbly tank.

Jean Caputo-Lee runs the Ferrets Unlimited ferret shelter in Cleveland, Ohio. She maintains a 75-gallon saltwater tank and a 55-gallon freshwater tank in her home, along with a handful of ferrets. Her ferrets are very interested in her fish.

"I see some of the ferrets trying to figure out how to get to the fish," she said. "The dining room table is near both tanks, and the ferrets will climb the table and watch them. They almost remind me of cats."

Caputo-Lee recalled a day when one of her ferrets, a male named Vin Dweezel, climbed to the top of her saltwater tank to get a closer look. He poked his head through the hole where the filter enters the tank and sampled the water. After taking a small lick, he began foaming at the mouth and pawing at himself like he'd gotten a mouthful of bitter apple.

Water seems to be the only attraction for Beechboro, Western Australia, resident Shirley Hewett's 27 ferrets, which free-roam her house and yard. Hewett has a fishpond on her property containing 30 goldfish, which was built so the ferrets could easily get in and out without being in danger of drowning. In hot weather, some of the ferrets go for a swim.

As for the 30 goldfish that live in the pond, the ferrets could care less.

"The ferrets seem to have no concept of the fish being there at all," Hewett said. "Even when the fish are being fed and the surface of the water is 'boiling' during a feeding frenzy, the ferrets take no notice."

### Safe Cohabitation

Learn safety tips for keeping ferrets and fish in one house. [Click Here>>](#)

Hewett noted that rather than concerning themselves with the fish, her ferrets like to duck their heads under the water and blow bubbles through their noses. "Sometimes the fish will come to them and nibble their whiskers and fur to see if they are tasty, but the ferrets act like the fish are not there," she said. "I think it's because they can't smell them, therefore they don't exist in the ferrets' world."

Although the water seems to be the main attraction for many ferrets, some actually do have an interest in the fish.

George Matthews of Massachusetts had a 35-gallon saltwater tank that was placed on a stand at the end of his bed. His two ferrets used to lie at the end of his bed and watch the fish with great interest.

"They would try and stand up and lean forward with their little paws on the glass as if they wanted to get the fish, but since the tank stands about 5 feet tall, it was not feasible for them to get to the fish," Matthews said.

The ferrets owned by Lisa Vible of Maryland are a bit more aggressive with the fish than some other ferrets, which prefer to simply observe from afar. Her ferrets Sammy, Teddy and Casper are intrigued with the Siamese fighting fish belonging to Vible's three daughters.

"The ferrets will go into my daughter Ashley's room – they seem to like her fish better – and stand very still and look up and watch the fish," Vible said. "They have found ingenious ways to get up on the bureau to get near the tank. Ashley has caught Teddy with his nose in the water and his front foot splashing the water! Teddy is the most aggressive with the fish – he has never caught them, but he does torment them. The other two ferrets watch him at first and then join in."

#### A Bad Mix

Although many ferret-and-fish households do not report problems with the pairing of these two species, disaster can sometimes strike. Ferrets that are aggressive toward fish can wreak havoc with an aquarium, while those that are simply curious can bring harm to themselves.

Ferret owner Neen Parkes of Wyoming had an unfortunate experience concerning one of her goldfish and a male ferret named Reddog.

Reddog became obsessed with goldfish Parkes had brought in from the outdoor pond to live in an aquarium during the winter. Parkes underestimated Reddog's persistence and didn't take precautions to keep him away from the tank. After repeated attempts at catching one of the fish, Reddog finally succeeded.

"Reddog wanted fish for dinner," Parkes said. "After several months of trying, I'm afraid he finally got one. He got soaked but managed to get my female." Although she tried to catch Reddog to rescue the fish, she couldn't get near him. "He took the fish, and ran and ate part of her before I caught him. I felt pretty bad about it."

Reddog isn't the only ferret that has worked hard to get at a fish – and succeeded. Valerie McVeigh of Alberta, Canada, had a similar experience with her ferret, Barnum, and a goldfish named George.

"George was a lionhead goldfish who lived quite happily in a 5-gallon fish bowl with pump, etc., for two years," she said. "For some reason, he'd escaped the notice of our dark-eyed white ferret, Barnum, while on a higher table in the living room. One fateful day, Barnum discovered the fish bowl, and we discovered Barnum up on the table, up to his head and shoulders in the water."

According to McVeigh, Barnum was fishing for George with his front paws. Before she could intervene, Barnum got a hold of George in his mouth and killed him.

"Barnum froze in place for a moment, then leaped down and headed up the stairs at a dead run with his prize in his mouth," she said. After the incident, Barnum continued to check out the table for two weeks looking for more fish.

Fish are not the only ones that can be victimized when ferrets and aquariums come together. Ferrets can also be harmed in a number of ways when coming into contact with a fish tank.

One favorite activity of ferrets is drinking aquarium water. Although this may seem harmless, in reality, ferrets can become ill from ingesting fish-inhabited water.

"Ferrets that drink from fish tanks can become infected with Giardia," said Bruce Williams, DVM, DACVP, of the Department of Veterinary Pathology at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in Washington, DC. "Although ferrets don't get as sick from this disease as many other animals do, they can still become ill, often with chronic diarrhea."

Dogs, cats and humans who become infected with Giardia suffer from vomiting, diarrhea and weakness, and must be treated with specific antibiotics. Although your ferret may not become terribly sick from the infection, it may pass it along to one of your other pets through contact with feces.

Williams advised against allowing ferrets to drink from fish tanks because of the risk of Giardia.

"We can't prove the Giardia actually comes from the fish, but ferrets that drink from tanks tend to develop these infections," he said. "The best thing to do is keep the ferret from drinking aquarium water."

Another hazard ferrets face when getting too close to fish tanks is physical injury. A ferret that works hard to get at a fish may accidentally knock a light fixture into the water and become electrocuted. Ferrets can also fall into a fish tank and drown, burn themselves on the tank light, or knock the tank over and become injured as a result.

### Taking Precautions

Does all this mean you can't have fish if you own ferrets? No, as long as you take proper precautions to protect both the fish and the ferrets from one another.

The most obvious way to keep fish and ferrets safe is to provide separate rooms for each. By not allowing ferrets to spend time in the same room with an aquarium, you are ensuring the safety of the fish and the ferrets.

Ferret owners who don't have a way to keep ferrets separated from an aquarium can take measures to make sure the tank is less interesting to the ferret.

"It is always important to try to look at things from the perspective of a ferret," said Sukie Crandall of New Jersey, an adviser for the International Ferret Congress. "Contemplate what a ferret might think of an aquarium – a place to fish, a fun light to investigate, a bubble maker, small holes on top to try to fit through."

By thinking about these components, you'll be able to anticipate the kinds of things your ferret might do when in the presence of a tank.

Crandall suggested putting screening over the ventilation holes in the top of the tank to prevent a ferret from sliding through the hole in an attempt to investigate the water below.

When it comes to protecting both the fish and the ferret, Crandall advised doing everything you can to keep the tank out of the ferret's reach.

"It pays to try to be sure that a ferret cannot get up to your aquarium," she said. "Design the room accordingly."

Elayne Barclay of the Cascade Ferret Network in Oregon, agrees. "The tank should be situated so a ferret cannot possibly get to it," she said.

Barclay noted that ferrets are attracted to the items associated with fish tanks, such as buckets of water aging for water changes, the flexible tubing for filtering and pumping (fun to bite through), and the chemicals and testing kits for monitoring water chemistry.

"Special precautions must be taken to protect the ferrets from harm," she said. "Ferrets are always trying to find new ways to kill themselves and a fish tank and its paraphernalia is a great opportunity they wouldn't want to ignore."

Barclay recommended keeping water buckets covered or out of the ferrets' reach so they can't fall in and drown. Keeping testing chemicals well out of the grasping paws of ferrets is also very important.

"Ferrets should be secured during water changes," Barclay added. "They really want to help out."

Ferret lovers who also appreciate the beauty and grace of fish can share their homes with both of these creatures if they take precautions. The best approach is to keep ferrets far away from fish tanks, for their safety and the safety of the fish.