

## A Ferret Training Journey

**Follow the ups and downs of a ferret owner who clicker trained her ferret using the principles of Karen Pryor's clicker training.**

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### Click For Info

My interest in training animals began as a young teen when I read *Lads Before The Wind* by Karen Pryor. About six years later, I was still interested in training, and I'd finally moved into an apartment where I could have a real pet, provided it was caged. I wanted a pet that could love me back, so of course I brought home a baby ferret.

Courtesy of Tarsha Rideout

GreyMalkin the ferret at first resisted going through a hoop.

I selected GreyMalkin because she was calm and not at all nippy. She was very young when I bought her; the smallest ferret I'd ever seen in a pet store. I handled her constantly for the first few weeks after I brought her home. GreyMalkin grew into an exceptionally calm and tolerant ferret.

### Ferret Trick Time

I wanted something that really looked like a trick, to prove to my skeptical friends that GreyMalkin really was a smart little ferret. I also wanted something that involved a prop, so she could not do it all the time anyway.

I figured going through a hoop would be easy, because she liked to go through tunnels already and always wanted to check out any object I was holding.

**Jump Through A Hoop:** I tried training GreyMalkin to go through the hoop by the scan-and-capture technique alone. My plan was to hold the hoop and wait for her to go through it on her own, and then click. My aunt gave me an old flying hoop toy and stuck around to observe. We were both surprised to see GreyMalkin actively avoid the hoop. This was the same ferret that bounced along so energetically she smacked into walls. She also tried to disappear down dark, unknown tunnels when I took her for walks, stopped only by her leash. Yet even when I put the hoop directly in front of her, she refused to touch it. She had only three fears in life: large open spaces; small, hyperactive dogs; and that hoop.

I switched strategies to shaping — reinforcing her for closer and closer approaches to the hoop, then for touching it, and eventually sticking her head through. Finally, I shaped her to go through the hoop, slowly and calmly. I originally envisioned her doing an energetic leap, but Grey's version was charming and sweet.

**Roll Over:** GreyMalkin learned to roll over next. It took weeks to teach her the first real trick, so I expected to invest a lot of time with each trick I taught her. But now she was an old pro. I watched her play and clicked when she rolled on her back by herself. She only needed a couple of clicks to encourage her to try different variations of playing on her back. She rolled a bit over and stayed there, she rolled over with a toy, and she rolled over in different locations. All I had to do was watch and click at the times when she rolled over farther than average. She got the basic idea down fast. She paused in mid-roll to just lie on her back, so I did a bit of shaping to polish it up to one smooth movement.

Now she had a trick she could do on her own, without a prop, and she used it to get whatever she wanted. I pointed and spun my finger counter-clockwise, and she learned she got a Ferretone oil treat for rolling when she saw that cue. She also used the trick to get me to open her cage door, or to play with her when she was bored. I even saw her rolling over in front of closed doors she wanted to get through.

**Sit Up And Beg:** Grey easily learned how to sit up and beg. She targeted the clicker, I raised it above her head and she followed it. Voilà! She was sitting up. She was a bit confused when I added a hand signal, which was my closed hand above her head. She must have thought any hand signal meant roll over. I was afraid she would get discouraged, because she rolled over so much without hearing a click. I liked to end sessions with a happy ferret, so I let her do "through the hoop" for a click.

I did a couple training sessions working on just sit up, starting with my hand low, and moving it a bit higher for each sit up. She seemed to catch on, and sat up whenever I put my hand high over her head. It took her a little while to learn the difference of the signals when I did a training session with all her tricks, especially when I started to mix up the order that I asked her to do the tricks. When in doubt about a signal, she rolled over first, and if that didn't get a click, she tried sitting up.