

## The American Ferret Association

**For nearly 20 years, the American Ferret Association has helped ferrets and ferret owners.**

*By Audrey Pavia*

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The proper care of ferrets and education of ferret owners are two goals of the American Ferret Association.

When a handful of ferret lovers in Montgomery County, Maryland, got together one day in 1987 to form a club, they had no idea what was in store. Originally created so local ferret owners could get together for fun events, the organization has since grown into perhaps the largest, most influential ferret group in the United States.

The American Ferret Association (AFA), once the mid-Atlantic Ferret Association, went from a regional group to a national organization in 1990 in response to the needs of ferret owners around the country. The domestic ferret was becoming an increasingly popular pet, and people needed information on how to care for these fascinating critters.

Today, the AFA goes well beyond just offering care information for ferret owners — although this is still an important part of the organization's job. The AFA holds ferret shows, puts on symposiums and works behind the scenes in the legislative realm and elsewhere to help ferrets.

### Helping Ferrets

The goals of the AFA are many: To promote the domestic ferret as a companion animal through public education via shows, newsletters, legislative education, and other venues; to protect the domestic ferret against anti-ferret legislation, mistreatment, unsound breeding practices and overpopulation, needless scientific research, and any practice deemed to lower the health standards or survivability of the animal; and to provide constant and up-to-date information about veterinarians, legislative activities, medical developments, research data, rescue shelters and other information of interest to ferret fanciers everywhere.

The way the organization puts these goals into action are impressive. The group serves as a clearinghouse for ferret-related information from the country's leading ferret experts, and offers much of this information online. Articles written by ferret veterinarians and peer-reviewed by AFA's Health Affairs Committee can be found on the group's website, including pieces about adrenal disease, Aleutian disease, cardiac disease and inflammatory bowel disease.

The AFA also provides ferret owners with referrals to veterinarians knowledgeable in ferret care. To help increase the number of veterinarians familiar with how to treat ferrets, the organization holds periodic veterinary symposiums. The last event took place in 2006 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was a two-day experience designed to educate veterinarians, veterinary technicians, students and allied health professionals. Attendees learned about ferret cardiology, emergency medicine and critical care, oncology, hepatic disease and more.

In keeping with the organization's goal to educate and inform, the AFA holds regular educational seminars and demonstrations. In 2008, the AFA sponsored a 1½ day course titled "Breeding Better Ferrets," which was designed to educate experienced, novice and would-be ferret breeders on ferret genetics and how to maintain a responsible breeding program.

Ferret breeders are a big part of the AFA, and the organization also provides a breeder referral service to the public.

### Ferret Welfare

The well-being of ferrets is at the top of the priority list for the AFA, evidenced by the group's many programs aimed at helping ferrets. The organization has an online ferret shelter referral service that lists ferret shelters across the nation. The group also started the Pamela M. Slack, DVM, Memorial Research Fund to provide grant monies for research in the area of ferret health. The group is also working in conjunction with the Mongo Memorial Distemper Titer Study Fund to support a research study headed by Ruth Heller, DVM, on ferret canine distemper titers.

The AFA also is concerned about the permissiveness of society to treat animals like products and impulse-purchases of ferrets from pet stores. "Many, if not most, pet stores simply don't have the resources or the manpower to assure that their

employees and management are trained in the proper husbandry of ferrets,” said Penny Hendrix, president of the AFA. “Most people purchasing ferrets from pet stores purchase them on impulse and are not given proper information on the care and needs of the ferret. Nor do they realize the time commitment of owning a ferret.”

Hendrix said this leads to ferrets being abused, neglected, abandoned or a combination of these. She said that most SPCAs and general animal shelters often aren't equipped to deal with ferrets or have a policy of euthanizing them, which leaves the burden of rescuing abandoned ferrets on ferret-specific shelters.

#### The Joy Of Ferrets

Although the AFA is involved with many serious issues, the organization also believes in having fun with ferrets. The group sanctions a number of championship ferret shows throughout the country. The organization also develops and maintains a professional ferret show system and judging standard, and trains, licenses and provides continuing education for ferret judges. Ferrets owners who show their furry companions can count on the AFA to maintain a database of points and titles that are awarded at AFA-sanctioned shows.

The AFA website is a wealth of information for ferret lovers who want to breed and show ferrets. Here they can find show system guidelines and information where they can learn about showing their ferrets or becoming a judge. The site also hosts a ferret show calendar, with dates, locations and contact information for national and AFA-sanctioned shows. Show results are also posted on the website, as well as listings of winners of the Ferret of the Year and Companion of the Year awards.

To learn more about showing ferrets, ferret lovers can see the AFA Color and Pattern Chart, which features photos and descriptions of different ferret colors and coat patterns. The AFA breed standard is also on the site, and describes the conformation of the ideal ferret, from the judge's point of view.

#### Working On Behalf Of Ferrets

As if all this wasn't enough, the AFA is involved with even more goings-on. Last year, the group instituted new member levels and services; a voluntary breeder certification program; a new spay/neuter fund; a new Specialty Ferret of the Year award (with the first awards banquet to be held in March of 2009); and ongoing fundraising and public awareness for black-footed ferret conservation efforts.

The future holds even more activities for the AFA, according to Hendrix. Plans include new informational/educational brochures, continued enhancements for the show/judging processes, expansion of AFA's website services, demographic surveys, and new ferret health handouts.

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