

## Ferrets Rule At MaFF

**Members of the Massachusetts Ferret Friends help ferrets and have fun together.**

*By Marylou Zarbock*

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Ferret welfare always comes first for members of the Massachusetts Ferret Friends. Photos Courtesy Alan and Joanne Ouellette  
Many of the general events for MaFF feature fun activities for ferrets and owners.

Owning a ferret made you an outlaw. In the past, that was the reality for the residents of Massachusetts. But many dedicated people came together in the 1990s to form a grassroots campaign to change the law — and they succeeded. Ferret ownership was legalized in Massachusetts on March 7, 1996.

The Massachusetts Ferret Friends (MaFF) organization formed not long after ferrets were legalized. MaFF is an organization for ferret lovers that works to promote ferrets as domestic pets and educate people about ferret ownership. Every March, MaFF celebrates Ferret Freedom Day to commemorate the legalization of ferret ownership.

### From Near-Failure To Success

By 1999, MaFF had more than 200 members, but participation in the club's activities was nearly nonexistent. By 2002, board members were considering dissolution of the organization. Phyllis Spy, who was clerk of the club at the time, approached one of the founders of MaFF to find out if the club could be saved. Losing the club was one thing, but she wondered what would happen to the ferrets it helped.

MaFF was reorganized in 2003/2004, and Spy was elected president, a post she holds today. She wanted club members who were passionate and committed to the organization, so she stopped granting free membership to anyone who adopted a ferret. Membership now costs a fee. Although this caused the number of members to plummet, it had a plus side. "The quality of membership grew," Spy said. "We have a great bunch of people who are always there to volunteer."

Spy considers becoming a marketing partner with Petco another big step. MaFF members alternate going to one of four local Petco stores every month for education days. Spy said MaFF has a wonderful rapport with Petco employees and told the story of Vampire, the nickname given to a ferret at one of the Petco stores that was a terrible biter.

MaFF members determined that this ferret was terrified of hands for some reason. They told Petco staff that Vampire needed to learn that hands are OK. The more the ferret was handled, the better. The employees were shown how to hold the ferret so she didn't have the opportunity to bite. Employees were also shown how to do the scruff-and-drag technique that a mother ferret would use to correct a baby ferret that acted up. Spy said the employees were wonderful. One girl even held the ferret as she worked the register. Within three weeks, this biting ferret acted completely different and went to a good home.

Spy said another reason for the success of MaFF is its area coordinators. They broke Massachusetts into four sections: South, North, Metro West and West. The area coordinators arrange adoption and education days at pet stores in their area and are there to help when a ferret emergency happens in their area. They can also hold events if they wish.

SPCA and local animal control officers also work with MaFF. MaFF members give hands-on education classes to animal control officers. Previously, if animal control officers got a ferret and had no knowledge of how to take care of it, it was euthanized.

Spy also changed the frequency of the monthly general meeting. Members are too busy to attend a monthly meeting, so she changed it to four general meetings a year, plus a fundraiser. The fundraiser always has a fun theme, such as a renaissance faire or pirate festival.

### Adding The Ferret Shelter

MaFF ran a foster network for many years. In 2006, it also opened a ferret shelter, which requires a permit. Diddy Wheeler, the former foster home coordinator, became shelter director in 2008 and runs the shelter in her home.

Spy said that about 90 percent of the e-mail questions they get are from people looking to adopt a ferret. However, not all applicants for a ferret will get one from MaFF. Wheeler got an application from someone who euthanized a year-old ferret because medical costs were too high to treat it. Wheeler said it's unlikely that someone who couldn't handle a ferret's medical costs would get a ferret from MaFF.

Since it opened, the ferret shelter has placed more than 300 ferrets. A big influx of ferrets comes to the shelter after children go back to school. On average, the shelter has 20 to 25 ferrets. Wheeler is careful that it doesn't get overfull. If it does, a plea goes out for foster homes.

When people contact the shelter about surrendering their ferret, Wheeler finds out the details of their situation. A ferret behavior problem might be solved with some advice. In cases where a family emergency or job change made taking care of a ferret impossible, MaFF offered the option of long-term ferret care until the life situation of the owners settled down. In one case, a landlord's ultimatum was the problem. When the ferret owner was advised to discuss options with the landlord, the situation was resolved by the ferret owner simply paying an extra security deposit.

The option of surrender is always there, and MaFF is happy to work with people, but Spy said sometimes people need a little pep talk to reconnect with their pet. Some ferrets, particularly older ones, may die rather than transition to a new home. Many people don't realize this.

"If you make it too easy to surrender, it takes the onus off them," Spy said, "but [owners] are still responsible." Accepting surrenders at the shelter is judged on a case-by-case basis.

Photo Courtesy Alan and Joanne Ouellette

Ferrets in the playground can romp, explore and show their true ferret nature.

#### MaFF's World Famous Ferret Playground

Seeing a puppy playground at an event inspired MaFF members to make a playground for ferrets. To do so, they put down a tarp in a 10 by 20 foot booth and then connected eight ferret playpens to enclose the entire area. They fill this giant playpen with tubes and toys for the ferrets to play in. Two E-Z Up shelters provide a roof. The playground made its debut in 2005. Bob Church saw it and commented that the ferrets inside were enjoying enrichment overload. The ferret playground has been a legend ever since. MaFF even gets invited to events because the playground is such a draw.

"We've had as many as six deep of people wanting to see the playground," Spy said. MaFF volunteers sit in the playground and answer questions from people. Spy likes the playground because it allows people to see the energy of ferrets. At previous events or expos, MaFF volunteers sat in a chair in the booth with a ferret on their lap and answered questions. This didn't show the true personality of ferrets. The playground sets the ferrets free to romp and interact.