

Hello, I am a member of the Golden State Ferret Society. We are a non-profit group dedicated to the health and well-being of the domestic ferret and the people who love them. We also provide education, ferret rescue, legalization information as well as social activities and support for people who love ferrets. This is basically the mission statement for our club.

There are two things I would like to really talk about from this statement: The first one is education. There is a lot of misinformation out there about ferrets. Some of the most common questions I run into are “aren’t those animals mean”, “aren’t they wild animals”, “don’t they bite”, “don’t they smell”, “aren’t they illegal?” The short answers are no, no, yes, yes and yes. The longer answer, for people who really want to know, is no, ferrets are not mean. At least ferrets who have been treated well are not. Any animal that is abused or hasn’t had it’s needs met has a potential to seem mean. And by ‘needs met’, I mean more than just food and water in a cage. I mean its social needs for company and play as well. Ferrets are very social animals. They need company and affection. They will give far more than they receive if given a chance. Ferrets have been domesticated for a very long time. That means they have gone through the process of hundreds of generations of living with people and have genetically adjusted to being part of our families. They are not wild animals any more than a cat or a dog is. They want to be a part of our families in our homes and a part of our lives. They are curious, fun loving animals without a mean bone in their little bodies. So no they are not mean and they are not wild animals. A lot of people confuse them with the American Black footed ferret which lives on the prairies in the mid west. Or at least they did. They are a highly endangered species, which people are working hard to save. I am not sure if this is true but I have heard there is a substantial reward for bringing a Black Footed Ferret in to the organization that is working to save them. If you have one, please bring it to me and we will collect the reward and take a vacation to Hawaii.

The actually history of where the domesticated ferret came from is sort of a subject of much debate in the ferret community. Some people believe they have been around as far back as the Egyptians and that they were displaced over time by cats. There are even some very old pictures on artifacts that with a little imagination can be made out to be ferrets. I don’t know. I have a hard time believing that since ferrets cannot tolerate hot temperatures and Egypt is rather known for it’s heat. But who knows maybe they have genetically altered over the years to become less heat tolerant. Another popular theory is that they are descendants of the European polecat. And from looking at pictures of polecats I can see where that theory comes from. I tend to lean more towards that one. Apparently they came over with the settlers from England aboard ships earning their way keeping the rat and mice population down. Then, once over here they worked in granaries as mousers and also most likely the settlers used them as they did in their homelands in the sport of ferreting. This is where they send a ferret down a rabbit hole and the ferret flushes the rabbit out of the hole. The hunter is waiting at the other end of the rabbit hole, out comes and the rabbit, the hunter bonks it on the head and I imagine you can guess the rest. Ferreting is still done in the British Islands.

There is a 1343 fresco from Pope Clements the fifth's bedroom that depicts hunting with a ferret. There is another in Queen Mary's Psalter from 1310-1335 called "Women ferreting" which clearly shows one woman with a ferret poised at the entrance to a rabbit hole and another with a cage standing at the other end of the hole. There is also an illuminated manuscript from a book called "The Book the Hunt" written between 1387 and 1391 by Gaston Pheobus, (Feebus) the count of Fiox (feeox) and Viscount of Bearn. This book was written to explain how to hunt various types of animals. The illustration shows how to use ferrets to hunt rabbits. So we have actual proof that ferrets and man have been working together in partnership for at least 500 years. Did you know that Queen Elizabeth the 1<sup>st</sup> was very fond of albino ferrets? In fact she would give them to people she liked to show her royal favor.

Now on to the question, don't they bite? Well yes and no. When ferrets are little kits they often bite and chomp and roll and play with each other and their mother. Once they join their human families they want to do the same thing with their new families. Much like little puppies and kittens they have sharp little teeth. I have often heard them referred to as little piranhas when they are 6-7 weeks old. However, one of your jobs as their new parent/owner/friend is to teach them that it is not appropriate behavior. It's seems cute while they are tiny animals, it won't be when they grow up and their teeth are sharp and strong. Let's face it, they are meat eaters and they have the appropriate teeth for their role in the food chain. Once a ferret is trained not to bite, for the most part, they don't. They might nip a little when they are heavily involved in play with other ferrets or even you but it does not break the skin and generally it doesn't even hurt, it is just play. But it is important to continually remind them that this is inappropriate. Most people I know just hold their mouth closed, look them in the eyes and say no. Then put them down and ignore them for a minute or two. It doesn't take long for them to figure out you don't like this behavior and it is not ok. It has been my experience that when a ferret bites, and he means business, it is because he has been hurt, he is hurting or he is scared. That pretty much goes for any animal from a bunny to a cute fluffy puppy. Many people then go on to tell me that they heard about this baby and a ferret...At this point I generally sigh, yup I heard that story too. I believe there was this one instance in my lifetime where a ferret was left where it could get into a crib with a baby and the ferret scratched and bit the baby. And not to downplay what happened to that family, but would you leave any animal in a place where they would have free access to a baby alone? I wouldn't and I doubt you would either if you are a responsible pet owner and parent. I didn't even leave my 3-4-5-6 year old unsupervised with my dog and I had the dog longer than the child. But what happens if she gets rough and pulls his fur or hits him, even accidentally. He doesn't know. Odds are he will just run away from her and we have certainly done our best to teach her to be gentle with animals and our dog has never bitten anyone in his life and is the gentlest dog in the world. But what if? He is a dog, he doesn't understand that she is a child and doesn't know better, he doesn't understand it was an accident. What if he snaps or bites her. I just don't want either of them in a situation where that can happen. So really who's fault was it. The ferret, or the parent? And while we are still on that vein, I have never heard anyone discuss ferrets that bite people other than that incident and vague recollections of something they heard once a long time ago from somebody who aunt's, cousin's, friend's, step

father's, niece was bitten by this animals and they are not sure whether it was a ferret or a parrot... I am sure you get where I am going here. As far as I know that baby is now well on her way to adulthood and people seem to remember with no trouble that one recorded incident from years and years ago. But people have trouble remembering that the papers are full of stories frequently about dogs that attack and even kill people. Do we villainize all dogs because of the ones who attack and bite? Are all dogs the same? Are all dogs trained, treated or socialized the same? No, of course not and all ferrets are not the same either. A ferret that bites is a ferret that hasn't been cared for, loved, or socialized properly. The same goes for a dog, any other animal or person for that matter.

Do they smell, yes of course they do. They have noses don't they? Well ok that is not what the person meant. Yes, ferrets do have a rather distinct odor that some people call a musky smell. I have even heard it described as a corn chip smell. A lot of people actually like that smell. You cannot wash ferrets every day. That will not help with the smell at all. To keep the smell down you should wash your animals once a month. More than that and their bodies will go into overtime producing natural oils for their fur and they may smell even worse. The important thing is to keep their litter boxes cleaned out and their bedding washed. All their bedding, and that include tents and hammocks should be washed once a week. Their litter boxes should be washed thoroughly once a week as well. It is also important that you clean your ferrets ears. Dirty ears could be helping them to not smell as nice as you like. However, to be honest, if you don't like the basic clean ferret smell you probably shouldn't have one in your home.

Which leads me to the next question...aren't they illegal? Yes they are. That is the simple answer. In the state of California it is illegal to have, own, transport or keep a ferret in any way. Next the person will usually say, I have heard that if you want a ferret you can get a permit. As far as I know, there is one permit in the state of California belonging to the California Domestic Ferret Association or CDFA that rescues ferrets. That permit is specifically so they can legally transport ferrets out of California to a shelter in a nearby state where they are legal. Local vets, police, human societies or owners who have had their pets confiscated call the CDFA and arrange for the pick up of the animals and transport to safety. There are no permits that allow people to own ferrets in California. Another myth people mention is that they have heard it is ok to have ferrets as long as you don't breed them and they are neutered. No again. So if you are considering crossing one of California's borders to go to a pet store and pick up a ferret to bring home, be prepared for what you are getting yourself into. While many local pet stores carry everything you need and there are vets here that treat ferrets, it is illegal to own and have them in this state at the current time. They could be confiscated from you and if you cannot reach an organization to transport them to safety your pet could be put to sleep and you could be fined. There are other places in the US where it is also illegal to own them such as Hawaii and New York City. Please check with the Department of Fish and Game in your area to determine whether they are legal to own where you live.

The next question I get after this is always the same: Why are ferrets illegal in California? Well, back in 1933 a statute entitled "The Importation and Transportation of Live Wild Animals" was drafted. This statute banned many animals, which were wild and not native to California. The intent of the statute was to avoid problems with non-native wildlife competing with native wildlife. Fortunately much of the wildlife listed in the statute and the one domestic animal, which was the ferret, people were allowed to keep as long as they were neutered males. If you were caught with an un-neutered male, the judge would order you to neuter the ferret and the Department of Fish and Game to issue a permit. However in the 1980s when the popularity of the ferret as a pet increased, ferret lovers requested that the Department of Fish and Game relax the regulation to allow for female ferrets as well. Instead of doing this The Department of Fish and Game began a campaign to eliminate the ferret from the state of California entirely. They asked the California Department of Health Services, which shared their bias towards ferrets to write a report supporting the ban. They wrote a report that completely misrepresented statistics on ferret bites and rabies cases. This led to the ownership of ferrets being banned completely in the state of California. In actuality there have been 12-14 cases of rabid ferrets reported in 300 years and not a single case of anyone dying from a ferret bite. This is compared to hundreds of thousands of reported rabies cases in dogs not to mention a reported 17 deaths from dog attacks per year.

Currently the Department of Fish and Game has the Sierra Club and the Audubon supporting their continued ban. Their support is erroneously based on a claim that if ferrets escaped or were released into the environment and formed feral colonies, they would endanger the native wildlife such as the mice and songbird population. Never mind that it is well established that they can not survive on their own anymore, never mind that they are legal in 48 other states and there has never been one reported case of ferrets forming a feral colony and endangering the environment in any way.

The second and last thing from our mission statement I want to talk about is ferret rescue. Why, in a state where ferrets are illegal would we need an organization dedicated to rescuing ferrets? The short answer to that is people have them. It is estimated that there are about 250,000 ferrets living in the state of California despite their illegal status. And when people have pets, they don't always take proper care of them and they are not always capable of seeing to their needs for the whole of the animal's life. People frequently don't want to keep the animals once the kid who cared for it has gone off to college, or they moved and the apartment doesn't allow pets, or they are having a baby and can't care for it anymore or it is sick or old and they can't afford the vet bills or a million other reasons. This is when they call us and we step in. Some people just think if they release it into the "wild" it will make it on its own. Not true. Ferrets have been domesticated for so long, even their hunting instinct is gone. They cannot fend for themselves. Most ferrets die within 48 hours of escaping or being released. Some die of lack of water within site of a water source. They just didn't know since it didn't come from a little dish with their name on it or a water bottle with the little silver ball at the end of the tube. Please, if you have a ferret and cannot keep it for any reasons do not release it or take it to the pound. Please call us. Someone will pick up

your animal, see to it's immediate needs as well as any medical needs it may have and see it to a shelter where it will be safe and cared for until a home can be found. No questions will be asked other than what your animals is used to eating and its medical history so we know what we can do to help it.

In order to contact us we have a website which is [www.goldenstateferretsociety.org](http://www.goldenstateferretsociety.org). Also we have a booth here where there are handouts with contact information for our club as well as lots of other information on caring for ferrets. We also have a local area list of veterinarians that treat ferrets, a list to help with ferret proofing your house and making it safe for your animals, a handout on why ferrets are illegal in California and what you can do to help with the continuous fight to legalize them in our state. Please stop by and visit us. We would be happy to talk with you about ferrets as long as you like as it is one of our favorite subjects. Thank you.