

# What Ferrets Need to Be Happy

By Alicia Drakiotes

While ferrets make wonderful pets, they are not the perfect pet for everyone. Sometimes people get a ferret on an impulse – they seem so cuddly and cute, and have such engaging personalities. Ferrets, however, are high-maintenance pets, so it is important to learn all about ferrets and their care before taking one home. Rocky's story will illustrate the effects of a casual decision to get a ferret.

## Rocky's Story

Rocky was a gorgeous ferret – a big boy with a plush sable coat and deep dark eyes that looked almost tearful. His beauty was probably part of the reason why his family got him. But, they weren't informed about what ferrets need to be happy. So, they left him in his cage all the time and seldom took him out to play or interact with them. Confined to his cage for months on end, Rocky did little more than sleep and eat. He gained weight and became obese. He spent so much time in his cage that he didn't know how to play anymore. He started missing the litter box and staining the carpet.

His family became fed up with him. They decided he was just too much trouble, and dropped him off at our shelter. We spent five months getting Rocky back into shape and teaching him how to play and be a ferret again. Rocky's food was rationed and we implemented a physical exercise program for him. He lost weight slowly at first and then more rapidly as his activity level picked up speed. Once settled in a happy, ferret-friendly environment, he dieted down to a perfect weight and didn't regain his penchant for gorging.

During that time he bonded with Bear, the shelter mascot. They bonded so closely that we were afraid to separate them, because of Rocky's tendency toward depression. So, we kept him and Rocky happily lived out his life with five other ferrets who ran and played together and got into lots of ferret mischief.



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Rocky's family probably acquired him on a whim, not thinking ahead to what it would actually be like to care for such a high-energy, intelligent animal. They didn't realize that getting a ferret as a pet involves making a commitment to care for that animal properly for the rest of his life.

They didn't know that ferrets can't be happy if they are kept in a cage long-term. In addition to plenty of good-quality food, fresh water, and a clean cage, ferrets need interactive play. This pet is perhaps closer to a human child than other furry companion animals. Ferrets are mischievous and curious, so they need supervision, training and interaction with their human caregivers. They can get seriously depressed if they have few opportunities to play and explore.

So, if you're thinking about getting a ferret, read as much as possible about them beforehand and talk to people who have ferrets. It's also a good idea to locate a ferret shelter or rescue group in your area. To help you decide whether a ferret is the pet for you, talk to the shelter staff and spend some time with the ferrets. Shelter personnel are always happy to educate the uninitiated on what's involved in caring for and training ferrets. Whatever pet you choose, make a responsible, informed decision.

*Alicia Drakiotes is the president and education coordinator of Ferret Wise Rescue and Rehabilitation Shelter ([www.ferretwise.org](http://www.ferretwise.org)) located in Marlborough, New Hampshire.*