

---

# GIMME SHELTER

---

## Keeping a Cage Interesting

by Pat Andrews  
Philadelphia, Pa.

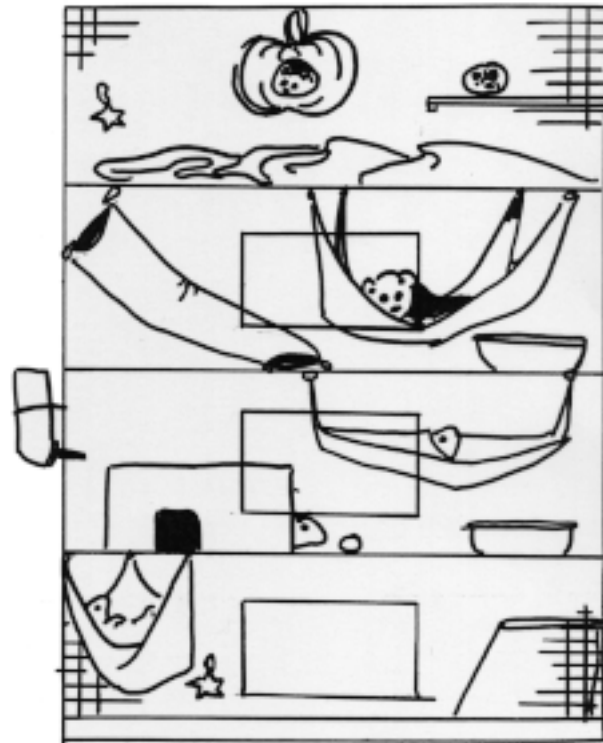
Several years ago, I volunteered at my local zoo as a docent. Docents could choose, up to a point, how they fulfilled their required hours. I did a number of special events, where I would attempt to impress the visitors with my limited knowledge, but I found that I really preferred research, specifically into animal behavior. I became obsessed with visiting other zoos, would always arrange tours when possible, and considered myself lucky when I had the opportunity to speak to any of the keepers. In all cases, the keepers were intensely devoted to their charges and worked toward giving these creatures the best possible lives.

It did not take long for me to become extremely interested in habitat (cage) enrichment. I learned to recognize the signs of boredom in various animals and how to alleviate it by changing the available space to mimic the natural environment. Little did I know that before too many years had passed, I would be putting all those tips to good use with my own ferrets.

While volunteering at the zoo, I first met ferrets. The zoo had two albino and two sable ferrets. These poor guys got very little handling and absolutely no training or opportunity to roam. Anyone handling them stood a good chance of getting nipped. I know I did! Still, they intrigued me enough to do some research, and I offered to write a small article for our docent handbook.

What I learned personally was that I was not ready for a ferret as a pet, and it took another eight years and the death of my last (well, at least for now) guinea pig for me to change my mind. I had gone into a pet store to get another guinea pig, but what I came out with was a 44-day-old cinnamon jill, which I had named Shiloh before I had even walked to my friend's car, parked two blocks away. Within a week, I had joined the local ferret club, and shortly thereafter bought from a fellow club member a 60 x 28 x 18 inch cage, which seemed enormous to me.

Almost everyone I met in the club told me that a cage could never be too big because "you'll want to get a friend for Shiloh so she will not be lonely." Well, I was not ready to hear that just yet. Why make myself responsible for another pet when I did not really know how to take care of ferrets yet? Besides, Shiloh had Tess (my dog) and Tess had Shiloh. What more could they want?



Drawing by Pat Andrews

Three months later, a fellow club member responded to an ad in the *Pennysaver* for a \$25 ferret. Originally she planned on picking up the ferret and taking it to the local shelter. The shelter operators even offered to accompany her to the pick up but the original plans fell through. A couple of days later, she called and asked if I would go along.

When we arrived at the home, we were ushered into a room that held a large homemade cage where a poorly marked silver mitt alertly watched our approach. I remember uttering "oh," and just like that, I was in love. After much soul searching over the next hour, I found myself agreeing to a trial adoption of the eight-month-old male I eventually named Amadeus. Within 24 hours I had discovered that not only was he suffering signs of malnutrition (skinny to the point of being skeletal, poor coat, lack of muscle mass, and endlessly hungry), but also he was deaf and suffered from cage paralysis. It tore out my heart when every now and then he would lose control of his hind legs and stagger and fall.

Now, I not only had to learn the basics of ferret ownership but also had to learn about nutrition and physical therapy to help this little guy. I started out by e-mailing other ferret folk and asking for advice. During this process, I heard a lot of differences of opinion about whether to cage or not to cage.

---

# GIMME SHELTER

---

I had preferred not to get into that argument, but I found that I had to cage Shiloh and Amadeus when I could not supervise them because my home was heavily cluttered. Between that clutter and their “sister” Tess, there were just too many opportunities for my two little ones to put themselves at risk.

Because I suffered some remorse about keeping Shiloh and Amadeus caged for so many hours out of each day, I made a real effort to give them as much play time as I could outside of the cage; I even woke up an hour earlier than necessary to give them a supervised play period before I went to work. In the evening, I turned them loose in the living room for as long as it took for them to wear themselves out and fall asleep in one desk drawer or another. This still left a lot of time in the cage—time they might not have spent sleeping if given a choice.

Boredom was not my only concern. I was worried about their fitness level. Because of Amadeus’ lack of muscle mass and cage paralysis, I wanted to build their exercise regime into their day-to-day routine, much like I did my own. Using the cage I mentioned earlier, I began planning ways to enrich their incarceration.

I pulled cage enrichment ideas from books, articles, and zoo keepers. Because I enjoyed spending my money on goodies for my “children,” I had numerous hammocks, tubes, toys, and drawers full of bedding. Watching Shiloh’s and Amadeus’ reactions to various items gave me ideas of what would intrigue them and what would be ignored.

Their cage has four full floors with a balcony over one-third of the upper level. On the top (fourth) level I frequently keep one of their sleep sacks. Sometimes I will hang a hammock or a cloth tube. Currently a water bottle hangs up there as well. The third level might hold the all-important food bowl, another hammock or tube, and perhaps a toy or two. I have a wonderful cloth hanging nest box that works best either here or on the second level.

At the present time, I keep a bowl of water attached to the cage because I have heard that some ferrets drink more if they have bowls instead of bottles. Sometimes I move this bowl to the third level and bring the food bowl to the second level to help keep the residents “hunting” their food and water.

In the bottom is the ever-present litter pan. It is the only item that is never moved to another location. I do not want to tempt fate! The rest of the space is taken up with a variety of bedding—old tee shirts, sweats, and assorted cuddly items

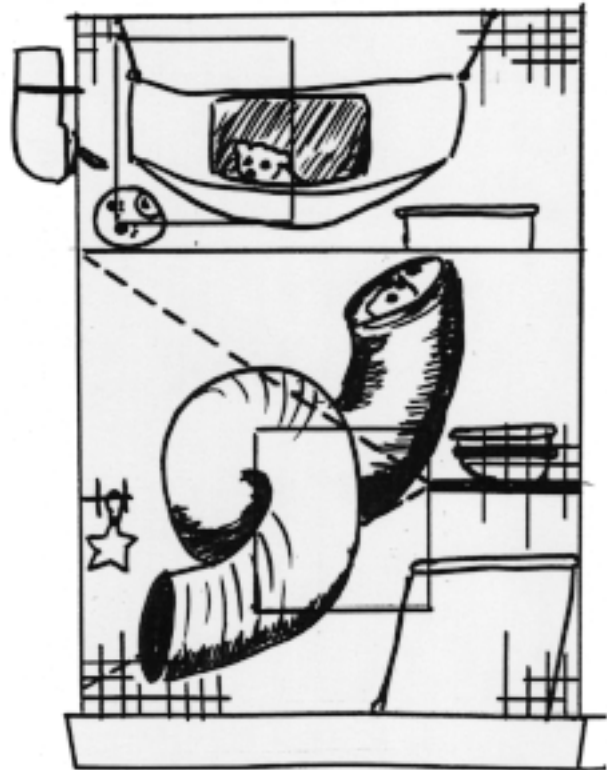
bought at a store that sells used baby items—where they can be found sleeping occasionally.

Key elements to alleviating boredom include frequent washing of bedding and toys. This gives the ferrets the impression of newness. While I seriously doubt that laundry detergent can completely fool a ferret’s sense of smell, it gives the items an exotic appeal, eliciting a sort of “where have YOU been?” reaction from the ferrets.

Favorite items are a small, baby afghan that is heavily textured with crocheted loops and a treat ball. In fact, the afghan is as likely to be dragged from one level to the next as to be slept with. All I know is that every ferret that has met that afghan loves it. As much as Shiloh and Amadeus love these things, they do not get to use them every day, so the toys and bedding always seem new.

Every other day I place the treat ball (which can be holding a couple of raisins, cheerios, or a high quality food for treat or reward) on the top level. Sometimes I even insert the ball into the hammock or sleep tube for the added effort involved. It is a rare day when the treat ball does not make it all the way to the bottom of the cage, completely empty.

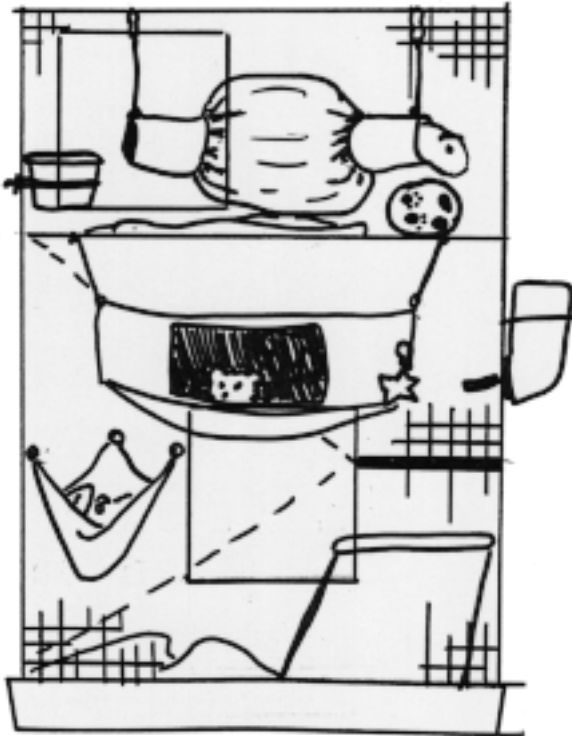
*(continued on page 20)*



*Drawing by Pat Andrews*

# GIMME SHELTER

CAGE (continued from page 19)



Drawing by Pat Andrews

When I have them, a Cheweasel is suspended on a metal shower ring from the bars of the cage. While Shiloh is not the least bit interested in Cheweasels, Amadeus loves them to the point of being possessive. It was really amazing, after seeing Shiloh's total disinterest, to find that my new boy was obsessed with Cheweasels. Other than this, however, I hesitate to hang toys in the cage out of fear that nails or teeth might be caught or a ferret might be strangled by the dangling item.

I also have plastic Easter eggs in the cage. It is more work for me to insert treats, but the little ones love the challenge. Sometimes when I am being lazy, I sprinkle a bit of their favorite treat food amidst the bedding on the ground floor. Using food to increase animal activity and alleviate boredom is a common ploy used by zoo keepers. If I could bear the mess, I would do something similar to what I have seen work at zoos—scatter favorite treats amidst piles of hay. I know a lot of people have rice boxes for their ferrets, and a good idea might be to toss in a raisin or two for each ferret to find.

The raisin-in-the-water-bowl game can cause a bit of a mess, but the digging relieves considerable ferret frustration. Obviously, everyone needs to tailor the activities to their personal ferrets. The toy that is heavenly to Amadeus gets nary a glance from Shiloh. The toy that Shiloh might play with safely for hours might turn into a death trap for Amadeus. Nothing is more important than really knowing a ferret.

Ferret owners should not give up just because they cannot afford or do not have space for a large cage. Even small cages can be tailored to serve as a ferret gymnasium. Pieces of dryer hose can be angled to make a curvy roadway that twists from the bottom of the cage to the top. Sturdy cord, hooks, or clips can be used to hold the hose into place. In cages that have large open spaces, additional hammocks can be hung. A box with ferret-sized holes can serve as a nest box or fort to be defended.

There are many more great ideas, and every ferret owner has their own tricks. The key is frequent change and observation to see what tickles a particular ferret's fancy. With some effort ferret owners may find themselves feeling a lot less guilty about caging their ferrets when proper supervision is not available.

## Ten Commandments for Ferrets

1. My life is likely to last 6 to 8 years. Any separation from you will be very painful.
2. Give me time to understand what you want of me.
3. Show me your love—it is crucial for my well being.
4. Remember, I am a small animal that can be hurt easily. Protect me from all that is brought around me.
5. Teach me with encouragement, not abuse.
6. Talk to me. Even if I don't understand your words, I recognize your voice.
7. Don't be angry with me for long, and don't lock me up as punishment. You have your work, friends, entertainment. I have only you.
8. Before you hit me, remember that I have teeth that could hurt you, but I choose not to use them.
9. Care for me when I get old. Remember, you too will grow old.
10. Go with me on difficult journeys. Never say, "I can't bear to watch" or "Let it happen in my absence." I'm scared and everything is easier if you are with me.