
LIVING WITH FERRETS

My ferret is lost... What do I do?

by Lisa Leidig, Director
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One situation guaranteed to strike fear in the heart of any ferret owner is a missing mustelid. With their naturally inquisitive behavior and love of exploring, ferrets commonly go astray. So what do you do when your ferret is missing?

First of all, don't panic. Panicking doesn't help you or your ferret, so take a deep breath and then start looking inside your house. Most lost ferrets never make it outside, so a thorough room-to-room search indoors eliminates the possibility of a trapped or sleeping ferret. If you're not the only person at home, split up the searching, with one person inside and another outside of the house. If you have another ferret or pet that could help locate the lost ferret, leash them and let them explore.

Start searching in the ferret cage by taking out all of the bedding to make sure that your ferret isn't simply asleep, deeply buried in his bedding. Once you've searched the cage, close it so Mr. Sneaky doesn't slip inside while you're searching the rest of the house.

Slowly expand your search within the room that the ferret's cage is in. Start from the ground level and work up to a height 30 inches above the highest object in the room. Leave no stone unturned: check behind furniture; under unmovable objects; inside drawers and cabinets; and behind (or above!) curtains. Any opening of at least 1 square inch is a possible escape point.

Squeaking or jingling a favorite toy might wake a sleeping ferret. This is an appropriate time to say that it's always a good idea to train your ferret to come to the sound of a squeak or rattle toy. Deaf ferrets can be trained to come to the vibrations created by hitting or stomping on the floor.) This training tool works well in the house. Many ferrets, once outside, however, are too excited by the new sites and sounds to be lured by that same old toy.

Such a thorough search is necessary because a ferret can get stuck behind furniture by catching his head in the gap between the wall and the object. Other common hazards include wrapping paper, toilet paper, or paper towel rolls. The cardboard of these tubes is rigid enough that a curious ferret

can get his head stuck when exploring the tube. Stories of missing ferrets found dead with their head inside such tubes are too common to discount. If you have such tubes in your house, either place them in an area inaccessible to your ferret, split them to make them safer, or throw them out.

As each room is explored (don't forget closets and bathrooms within rooms!), place bedding, a food bowl, and a water bowl inside the room and close the door. Measure and mark the levels of food and water in each bowl. Rechecking these dishes will tell you if a ferret has visited. Fresh stool in a litter pan is a good clue, too.

If you find a spot where the ferret might have been able to get inside the walls, making a lot of noise and placing food, water, and treats near the entrance might convince the ferret to come out. Do not seal this entrance but monitor it closely. Follow the same procedure with floor vents.

Continue to expand the search throughout your house gradually, carefully looking under and behind couches, refrigerators, ovens, washers, and dryers. Kitchens and utility rooms offer plenty of nooks and cubbies in which a ferret can curl up and hide. Additionally, look inside dishwashers, dryers, washing machines, oven drawers, cabinets, etc. Check windows with screens to verify that the ferret did not escape through a window and also look at your dryer vent; most are flimsy plastic and can be penetrated readily.

Once you have determined that your ferret is not in the house, it is time to enlist the help of family members, animal care professionals, neighbors, and children. Search your neighborhood in ever-widening circles and overlap areas. Anecdotal evidence indicates that most ferrets are located within a half mile of their home. Friends and family members can help you quickly cover more ground.

First, walk the neighborhood squeaking or rattling a favorite toy while calling the ferret's name. While you're out, knock on every door and ask if anyone has seen anything unusual. If you live in a ferret-friendly area, show pictures of your pet and give your name and number (or the number of your veterinarian's office if you're concerned about releasing your home telephone number). Ask your newspaper carrier, mail carrier, and other delivery personnel about any unusual small animals they might have spotted near your home. Because most ferrets do not travel very far from their home, a door-to-door search often turns up the wayward pet. In addition, neighborhood children know almost everything going on within a community, so tell as many as you can about your ferret, including his color and size, and make sure that you

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mention how much you miss him. Many lost ferrets are "adopted" by well-meaning neighbors who live within blocks of the ferrets' original homes but never knew who owned the ferret.

Ask your veterinarians and any veterinary clinic, especially the emergency and after-hours services, within approximately 10 miles of your home (depending on how many clinics are close to your home) to contact you about any stray ferrets coming in for care.

Call the local animal control agencies and Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (S.P.C.A.) shelter and inquire about a lost ferret. You must call these places daily because these agencies do not keep your information on file. If a ferret shelter exists nearby, notify the directors that your ferret is missing; stray ferrets picked up by animal control are often released to a local ferret shelter. When visiting shelters, have pictures of your ferret handy.

In addition to talking to people, there are a few more steps you can take. Leave a cage outside with a favorite treat and

water in hope that the ferret will return and curl up inside. Have-a-heart traps can be rented from most animal control agencies, but you might catch only a neighbor's cat. Print flyers describing your ferret. Place an advertisement in a local newspaper; people living in ferret-unfriendly locations need to be careful. A good euphemism is "small exotic pet." Offer a reward for the safe return of your pet.

Above all, keep up hope and keep searching and knocking on doors. I know of at least three instances in which a ferret was found by a neighbor who wanted to keep the ferret because it was cute. Because the owners of these ferrets constantly reminded the well-meaning rescuers through flyers and door-to-door searching that the ferrets already had loving homes, the ferrets were eventually returned.

To prevent the trauma of losing a pet, ferret owners should be aware of where their ferrets are at all times and should rigorously ferret proof their homes. But in the case of a missing ferret, an owner's being well-armed with information may prevent a missing pet from being lost forever.

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