

## **Can You Love a Ferret?**

By Dean D. Manning. From *Off the Paw*, Jan./Feb. 1992

I stole this title from an essay written by an Australian colleague and published in a newsletter not unlike this one. The content is totally different, of course, but the question intrigues me. And I must say the range of answers it evokes surprises me somewhat. For a remarkably large number of people— including some who consider themselves “ferret fanciers” - the answer is flatly “no.” Included in this group is an acquaintance who once told me that “Anyone who talks to an animal is sick!” For him, professing love for any animal was absurd; this loftiest of emotions was, and should be, reserved exclusively for other people. Respect and even admiration for animals was permissible. But love? Never. His was a genuine conviction.

I can't say I share it. To my mind, the question is less one of “whether” than “why.” Think about it for a minute. Ferrets lack that utter, submissive devotion that earns the dog the title of “man's best friend.” They lack the elegant dignity and people-manipulating talents of the cat. They're no good for hauling us around, herding our livestock or guarding our homes. Most of them aren't even much good at catching mice. They are pretty good at transporting things—like pipes and slippers—but “fetch” isn't necessarily the operative word. What we have in the ferret is a supremely well-adjusted little creature that's content to hop around in it's own happy little world, interacting with us only at the periphery.

On the surface of it, that isn't much to love. So how do these woolly little clowns manage to captivate those of us who cherish them? Good question. I think a lot of the answer lies in the way ferrets can make you feel. For a lot of us, there's something magic about the sight of a cavorting, chuckling ferret tumbling across the floor, something that brightens your whole outlook on life. Face it—ferrets mess with your mind. I figure the only people that might have just cause to resent that fact are psychiatrists. It's a clear case of unfair competition; ferret therapy is a lot less expensive than conventional psychotherapy. To say nothing of being more fun.

But there's more to the enchantment potential of a ferret than high energy and a boundless capacity for fun. These little beasts exhibit a peculiarly high level of trust. Even among those that haven't had such great experiences with people or life in general, ferrets seem to think everyone is their friend and every situation is an opportunity for play. That trust can make them look fearless, or plain stupid, depending upon how you look at it. It can also be sort of a mixed blessing.

Anyone who has ever had to make that final decision regarding the life of a trusting pet knows what I mean. I recently had to part with one of the dearest little ferrets I ever knew. His insulinomas and adrenal tumors finally grew beyond our ability to help, and they slowly robbed him of his quality of life. In the end I could respond to the trust he placed in me in only one way. To say it wasn't easy is a grotesque understatement.

I've never much been one to anthropomorphize pets. There is genuine solace to be found in their limited capacity for reason and comprehension. I'm sure my little friend had no idea why my hands were shaking as he lay there cradled in my lap. And as he slipped quietly away beneath that anesthetic cloud, I doubt that he could have understood the salty drops falling on his fur. I think many of you can. So you tell me: **Can you love a ferret?**

**In sympathy for anyone who has ever laid to rest a beloved pet.**