

DOMESTIC FERRET ISSUES IN CALIFORNIA

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TAXONOMY

The domestic ferret is a [form or subspecies of the European polecat](#), *Mustela putorius*, which is native to the woodlands, pastoral areas, and wetlands of Europe. [King \(1990\)](#) wrote, ". . . the ferret and European polecat belong to the same biological species," and "Ferrets are fully interfertile with *M. putorius* and have exactly the same karyotype . . ." Also, [Wellstead \(1981\)](#) reported that "They interbreed readily, the offspring are all fertile and their chromosome count is identical."

Other English vernacular names for the domestic ferret include ferret and European ferret. Western polecat is another name for European polecat. Fitch is a name sometimes applied to domestic ferrets and to wild polecats.

The Smithsonian Institution's [U.S. National Museum](#), Walker's Mammals of the World, and [Revised Checklist of North American Mammals North of Mexico, 1997](#) (Jones, et al.), include the domestic ferret in the species *Mustela putorius*, and they use the name *furo* (i.e., *Mustela putorius furo*) to denote the domesticated form or subspecies. However, the name *Mustela furo* is often used by the public and many biologists. Others use *Putorius furo*. The Zoological Society of London's *Zoological Record* includes the name *Mustela furo* in its '[experimental](#)' animals list. *Mustela putorius furo*, *Mustela putorius* form. *furo*, *Mustela furo*, *Putorius putorius furo*, and *Putorius furo* are used by various authors in the [Zoological Record](#). The [National Center for Biotechnology Information](#) uses both *Mustela furo* and *Mustela putorius furo*.

The scientific names *Mustela putorius furo*, *Mustela putorius* form. *furo*, *Mustela furo*, *Putorius putorius furo*, and *Putorius furo* are alternative names used to describe the same animal, the domestic ferret. Any of these names could be applied to this animal, whether it is a ferret in the wild in New Zealand, a ferret kept as a pet in an American city, a ferret used in chasing rabbits from their warrens in Ireland, a ferret raised for its pelt on a fur farm, or a ferret used in disease testing.

Mustela is the genus name. An example of a different species of this genus is *Mustela nigripes*, the black-footed ferret that is native to North America. An example of a different genus is *Taxidea taxus*, the American badger. [Note: *Mustela furo* and *Mustela putorius furo* are abbreviated *M. furo* and *M. p. furo*.]

The genus [Mustela](#) includes the polecats, ferrets, weasels and many other species of small, fur-bearing carnivores found around the [world](#). "Within the genus *Mustela*, ferrets belong to the subgenus *Putorius*, from which there are only three extant species: *M. putorius*, the European polecat; *M. eversmanni*, the Siberian, or steppe polecat; and *M. nigripes*, the black-footed ferret. The European polecat lives in open forests and

meadows, and is thought to be the [ancestor of the domestic ferret](#). The Siberian polecat looks nearly identical to the black-footed ferret and leads a similar life on open grasslands and semi desert regions across Russia, China and Siberia."

Polecats and weasels, together with badgers and otters, are classified in the [Family Mustelidae](#), ([species list](#)). Skunks have long been classified in the mustelid family, but [new genetics work](#) supports separation of skunks into their own taxonomic group, Family Mephitidae. This classification has been adopted by the [Integrated Taxonomic Information System](#) and by Jones, et al., [Revised Checklist of North American Mammals North of Mexico, 1997](#).

Phylogenetic Relationships:

- [Bininda-Emonds, et al. \(1999\)](#) (in press)
[Hint: In TreeBASE (top frame), enter Keyword: [Mustela](#) and Search on: [Taxon](#); then press the Submit button. When [Mustelidae \(2\)](#) appears in the right frame, press the Search button. In the left frame, scan down to Study #1, Analysis #8, Results, then select the left symbol (Draw Tree) to view the phylogeny diagram in the right window.]
- Dragoo, J.W., and R.L. Honeycutt. 1997. Systematics of mustelid-like carnivores. *Journal of Mammalogy*, Vol. 78, No. 2 pp. 426-443.

The Families [Viverridae](#) and especially [Herpestidae](#) (often grouped together in one family, [Viverridae](#)) are represented by a diversity of species, such as the mongooses, some of which are similar in many respects to mustelids. The [Egyptian mongoose](#), *Herpestes ichneumon*, ([photo](#)) was important in the [religion of the ancient Egyptians](#), and [depictions](#) of it have been erroneously interpreted by some as being evidence of ancient domestication of the ferret.

Links:

- "[Some of the Other Small Mustelidae of the World](#)"
- "[California's Native Terrestrial Carnivores](#)"

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DESCRIPTION OF THE DOMESTIC FERRET

Size

Domestic ferrets weigh from [1 to 5.5 pounds \(0.5 to 2.5 kg\)](#). They weigh somewhat less than chihuahuas and weigh much less than most house cats. Their length, including the tail, may be [17 to 24 inches \(44 to 60 cm\)](#), the male being about twice as large as the female.

Ferrets are as large as, or larger than, nearly half of California's native terrestrial carnivore species ([Table 1](#)). About the same size as minks, ferrets are larger than either of the [two weasel species](#) that naturally occur in California. Long-tailed weasels native to California are [similar in facial markings](#) to some [ferrets](#); however, long-tailed weasels are much smaller, weighing one-half to one pound (0.3 to 0.5 kg).

Ferret Colors and Patterns

Domesticated ferrets have been selectively bred for a variety of [coat colors](#), including albino. Some are [similar](#) to that of the [European polecat](#). Various [colors and patterns](#) have been developed for ferrets used as pets or fur animals. [White ferrets](#) have [long been used in hunting rabbits](#), such as in the practice of [falconry](#). Show standards for ferrets have been adopted by the [American Ferret Association, Inc.](#) and the [League of Independent Ferret Enthusiasts](#). [Genetics of coat color](#) in ferrets is described by Dr. J. McNicholas. [Also, see [Ryland and Bernard \(1983\)](#).]

"Hair color may also change with the season. Many ferrets change their entire color pattern as they age, losing, gaining, or changing their mask configuration with each passing year. Therefore, photographs are an unreliable means of identification. Microchips are preferred." - [S. Chastain, DVM and C. Chastain, DVM, Preston Road Animal Hospital](#)

"Most feral populations revert to a form that has the pattern of the wild Western polecat but in a rather dilute, faded form." - [Corbett and Ovenden \(1980\)](#).

Hybrids between ferrets and polecats in the wild in Europe are "the result either of escaped albino ferrets breeding with wild polecats, or are escaped dark or parti-coloured animals which man has produced deliberately by crossing the domestic albino ferret with the wild polecat." - [Lever \(1985\)](#).

Domestic ferrets have long been hybridized with European polecats in order to develop certain desirable traits, such as improve pelt characteristics ([Hagedoorn, 1954](#)). [Poole \(1972\)](#) conducted experiments comparing certain developmental and behavioral characteristics, such as alertness and fear of man, among captive ferrets, polecats, and ferret-polecat hybrids.

Skull

- [Ferret skull](#) (detailed photos)
- [Ferret skull measurements and dentition](#)
- [Dentition](#)
- [Comparison of ferret and mink skulls](#)

Tracks

- [European mustelids](#)
- [North American Mustelidae and Mephitidae](#)
- [Mammal Tracks from Track Plate Stations](#) (from [Redwood Sciences Laboratory](#))

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BIOLOGY, PHYSIOLOGY, AND DISEASES

Behavior

In describing ferrets, [Corbett and Ovenden \(1980\)](#) wrote, "*Feral animals behave as polecats.*"

Unlike prairie dogs or ground squirrels which live in colonies, ferrets are fairly solitary and individually require a sizable home range. According to a study by Moors and Lavers (1981), "*the males and females share the same ground but exclude other ferrets of the same sex, at least from the centers of their home ranges. A ferret may shift its home range during its life according to the distribution of food and neighbors. In New Zealand in a [wetland]/dune/farmland area home ranges of males averaged approximately 100 acres and that of females, approximately 30 acres.*"

For other references, link to the [bibliography index](#).

Diet

Ferrets in the wild feed on a wide array of small ground-dwelling animals. The best information on diet of feral ferrets comes from studies in New Zealand. [Link to dietary studies in [New Zealand](#)]

Ferret predation was studied in pastoral habitats in southern New Zealand; ferrets preyed upon a variety of mammals, birds, reptiles, and invertebrates, but lagomorphs constituted 77% of the diet, and "*All indications from this and previous diet studies in New Zealand is that ferrets are opportunistic, generalist predators.*" - [Smith, et al. \(1995\)](#).

For other references, link to [bibliography index](#).

Predatory Behavior

"The predatory behavior of the ferret (Mustela putorius f. furo L.): In young male ferrets the killing of prey can be observed first between day 55 and 60 of life. Up to day 70 in only 40% of all prey-catching experiments the prey is actually killed. From day 83 on all ferrets succeed in killing their prey (mice). The killing time is on the average 77 s(econds). On the other hand, ferrets reared in isolation from day 30 do not kill their prey reliably before day 90. The killing (sic) time is essentially the same as in normally reared ferrets." - [Kastner, D., and R. Apfelbach \(1981\)](#).

Development of prey-catching behavior

- visual and tactile stimuli ([Apfelbach, 1977](#))
- development of olfactory preference ([Apfelbach, 1978](#))
- imprinting on prey odors ([Apfelbach, 1986](#))

"To hunt, drive and kill is a ferret's natural instinct and disposition." - [Harding \(1915\)](#).

[Ferrets "...capture rabbits underground and are capable of killing adult rabbits."](#) - Dr. T. Crosby and J. McLennan, Landcare Research, New Zealand.

"Occasionally the ferret will kill underground, feed on the rabbit and then go to sleep next to it, this is called a "lay-up". Because of their larger size, hobs (males) are more likely to kill and hence are more prone to lay-up." G.A. Cooke, "[Hunting with Ferrets](#)".

["We had no option but to clear the rubble to arrive to the dead rabbit and the snoozing ferret."](#)

Links to:

- use of the ferret as a [hunting](#) animal
- ferret predation behavior in [New Zealand](#)
- [hunting skills of pet ferrets](#)
- [bibliography index](#) for 'behavior', 'hunting' and related topics

Growth, Development, and Life Span

Ferrets may be considered to be adults at about 6 to 7 months of age, when they have attained nearly full adult size. Sexual maturity is reached at "*9-12 months, or the spring following birth.*" ([Ferret Facts](#), from *The Complete Book of Ferrets*). "*They start to show old age or geriatric problems around 3 years of age.*" ([Bienville Animal Medical Center](#)). In the wild, "*...high ferret mortality is a natural feature of ferret dynamics in semi-arid New Zealand.*" (G. Norbury, Landcare Research). "*The average life span of wild male polecats (the wild ancestor of ferrets) in Britain has been estimated at only 8.1 months (Blandford, 1987). The situation in New Zealand is probably similar...*" ([Lugton, 1997](#), p. 97).

Ferrets in captivity [rarely exceed 10 years of age](#). In the U.S., average life span is typically described in veterinary sources as 5-6 years (e.g., [NetVet](#)), 5-7 years (e.g., [Bienville Animal Medical Center](#)), or 5-8 years (e.g., [Murphy Animal Hospital](#)). For example, according to [Ferret Medicine and Husbandry](#), Preston Road Animal Hospital, "*Ferrets are fairly resilient, and resistant to disease, but typically have a relatively short life*

span of 5-7 years on average." In contrast, some U.S. pet ferret literature sources, suggest longer lifespans (e.g, "*A well cared for ferret generally lives from 8 to 11 years.*" - Second edition (1995) of [Morton and Morton, 1985](#))

Dick Nutt, in [Once Upon a Time in America](#) (1998), wrote, "*On the veterinary side of life there are some areas where British vets will disagree with their American counterparts, and when Mike Oxenham, probably the top ferret vet in Great Britain, gave lectures in the States he caused some surprise when he compared the average life-spans of home bred ferrets in this country to the much shorter average of mass bred ferrets for the pet trade in USA.*"

Other sources:

- [An Annotated Bibliography on the Ferret](#), Whisson, D., and T. Moore (1997)
- [Biological overview](#) - NetVet
- [Ferret Facts](#) - from "*The Complete Book of Ferrets*" by Val Porter & Nicholas Brown

Physiology and veterinary links:

- [American Veterinary Medical Association Position on Ferrets](#)
- [Year 2000 Action Plan](#), American Association of Public Health Veterinarians
- [Diseases of Ferrets](#) (1990)
- [The Ferret Pathology Home Page](#)
- [Ferret Medicine and Husbandry](#)
- Links to [Ferret Diseases](#)
- "*Management of the Ferret*" [Symposium](#) (.pdf).
- [Diseases shared among people and pets](#) (.pdf).
- [Ferrets and human influenza](#)

Rabies information:

- [Compendium of Animal Rabies Control, 1999](#) (National)
- [U.S. ferret rabies cases](#)
- Question and Answer: [What happens if my pet \(cat, dog, ferret\) is bitten by a wild animal?](#) - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Link to [California public health issues](#).

Habitat

Ferrets in the wild occur chiefly in temperate woodlands, grasslands, pastoral habitats, wetlands, and other areas similar to the habitats used by European polecats. The best information on feral ferret habitat use comes from studies in New Zealand. [Link to habitat of ferrets in [New Zealand](#)]

According to [Jeffares \(1986\)](#), "*Because of its very simple digestive traits, the feral ferret must have available a permanent source of water.*"

HISTORY OF FERRETS IN THE U.S.

"[Once Upon a Time in America](#)" - Dick Nutt, National Ferret Welfare Society, U.K.

[1862 Pennsylvania law prohibiting use of ferrets to hunt rabbits in three counties](#)

Other reference sources:

- [Early importation and breeding](#) - Dolensek and Burn (1976).

- [Early uses for fur farming and for hunting pests and game](#) - Harding (1915).
- [Breeding and use of ferrets in the U.S. for ratting](#) - Mannix (1967).

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USES OF THE DOMESTIC FERRET

[Hunting](#) [Lab](#) [Fur](#) [Pet](#) [Breeding](#)

Ferrets Used in Hunting Game and Rodents

Domestic ferrets were used as an aid in hunting rabbits in the [Middle Ages](#) in [Europe](#). In [England](#), a 1390 law restricted ownership of ferrets to inhibit rabbit [poaching](#). [Ferreting](#) is used in the U.K. and other countries today, mainly for rabbit hunting and control. As a means of controlling local rabbit populations, it is an [alternative](#) to gassing, snaring, shooting, and releasing pathogens.

Ferrets have been used in killing rodents, as well. *"If a ferret has been well handled and is of proper age, very little training is necessary to make fine ratters of them."* - [Harding \(1915\)](#)

Ferreting articles

- "[The Humble Ferret; The art of working ferrets](#)"
- "[Hunting with Ferrets](#)" - G.A. Cooke
- "[Working Ferrets](#)", a photo essay
- [One ferret's first rabbit](#), a photo essay
- Ferret [taming and training methods](#) for hunting in Sicily (Abstract, 1998)
- Using ferrets in [rat control](#) in the U.K. (in Part 4 of "[An Apprentice in Field Sports](#)")
- Former use of ferrets in the U.S. for [ridding pests](#), such as [killing rats](#) in chicken sheds.
- Allowance for the use of ferrets in Ohio for taking hares and rabbits damaging fruit trees and nursery stock [Use search term "ferret" to find [Ohio Revised Code](#) Section 1533.02]
- "[Working," "pet," and "show" ferrets](#)
- [Other ferreting articles and stories](#) from the National Ferret Welfare Society, U.K.
- Effectiveness of ferreting for the [study and management](#) of rabbit populations in southern England.
- The ferret as an aid to winter rabbit studies. Linduska, J.P. 1947. *J. Wildl. Manage.* 11(3):252-255. (Michigan, U.S.)

Use in falconry (U.K.)

- Use of ferrets in [falconry](#).
- [A Manual of Falconry](#)
- Falconing with [hawks and ferrets](#)
- [Handling ferrets](#)

Use with dogs

- Hunting rabbits with ferrets and [dogs](#)
- Hunting rabbits with ferrets and dogs: [the lurcher](#); [lurcher articles](#)
- Rabbit hunting in Malta with ferrets and the [Kelb Tal-Fenek](#)

Instances of Ferrets Being Illegally Used as Hunting Animals in California

In February 1973, California Department of Food and Agriculture reported that a white ferret was found in possession of two falconers who had been stopped by a State Park Ranger at O'Neill Reservoir, Merced

County. The ferret was confiscated by Department of Fish and Game.

A recent poaching case "resulted in the conviction of a suspect who possessed several ferrets at his residence and was using them to hunt rabbits. He was fined \$370 in Tulare County and \$1,215 in Kings County, totaling \$1,515, one day in jail, and three years probation." - Calif. Dep. Fish & Game, Region 4 News, February 1996.

Use of domestic ferrets for hunting in states of the U.S. (see [1996-97 Nationwide Survey](#))

Reference sources on ferreting:

- [Carnegie \(1988\)](#). Ferrets and ferreting: A practical manual on breeding, managing, training and working ferrets.
- [McKay \(1989\)](#). The ferret and ferreting handbook.
- [Wellstead \(1981\)](#). The ferret and ferreting guide.

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Ferrets as Laboratory Animals

Domestic ferrets have been raised in captivity for medical research since the [early 1940s](#). Medical research is now an [important use](#) of this animal. [Wellstead \(1981\)](#) wrote that in Britain, "The number of working animals now runs second to those kept as laboratory animals." Compared with other species, the number of ferrets now used in research is relatively small, but laboratory ferrets have [many research uses](#), including [toxicology](#) studies and [bacteriological and virological](#) studies. Ferrets are particularly important in research on [influenza](#), because ferrets are infected by human type A and B influenza viruses, which can be transmitted between [humans to ferrets](#) and from [ferrets to humans](#).

Importation and possession of domestic ferrets for medical research and for educational purposes are legal in California, under permit from the Department of Fish and Game, as authorized by the [Fish and Game Commission](#). Fewer than 1,000 ferrets are possessed under California permits, mainly for use at university and medical research facilities.

Use of domestic ferrets as laboratory animals in states of the U.S. (see [1996-97 Nationwide Survey](#))

[Ferrets as Laboratory Animals, A Bibliography](#)

"The Effects of Environmental Enrichment in Ferrets" - from [Smith, C.P., and V. Taylor \(1995\)](#).

Ferrets as Fur Animals

Domestic ferrets have been raised in captivity in the 20th century as fur animals, as minks have been. The fur or pelt is called "fitch." Also, the term "fitch" may be used to describe a ferret that is being raised for its fur, to a color pattern similar to that of European polecats, to hybrids of ferrets and polecats, or to European polecats themselves.

According to the [International Fur Trade Federation](#) and the [Fur Commission USA](#), mink and fox are the main fur farm animals produced in the world, and other "species farmed on a smaller scale include nutria, chinchilla, fitch, sable and finn raccoon." In 1995, Finnish [fitch production](#) was 40,000, down from 70,000 in 1994. [[Fitch pelt prices](#) from recent Finnish Fur Sales] [[Production of ferrets as fur animals \(fitch\) in New Zealand](#)]

[Fitch](#) fur is used in the manufacturing of garments and in [other items](#), including [fishing flies](#).

"Specially-bred ferrets, called fitches, have been [farmed in New Zealand](#) for their fur." (New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries). Jeffares (1986) evaluated the prospects for trapping feral ferrets in New Zealand [for use in the "fitch" fur market](#).

Ferrets as Pets

Pet ferrets and hunting ferrets are the [same animal](#). Only recently have ferrets been widely used as [pets](#). Promotion of ferrets as household pets began in the 1970s in the [U.S.](#), and pet keeping in other countries (e.g., in [U.K.](#), [Germany](#)) is also a recent activity. California Agriculture border stations intercepted illegally imported ferrets beginning in 1976/1977, when there were 3 detections (of one or more ferrets each), but the number of detections of vehicles with ferrets steadily increased annually thereafter, growing to 150-300 detections per year by the mid 1980s.

Nationwide pet ownership surveys conducted for the [American Veterinary Medical Association](#) and the pet food industry do not support claims made by many ferret organizations that there are many millions of pet ferrets in the United States. A California Department of Fish and Game [review](#) of such pet ownership surveys showed that the ferret has not become the "third most popular" pet mammal in the U.S., as is often claimed. The population of pet ferrets is [one and one-half percent](#) of the nation's pet cat population.

In many municipalities in North America, ferrets are not legal to own ("[Ferret-Free Zones](#)"), even if the state does not prohibit ownership. Ferrets are illegal to have as pets in [Queensland](#), Australia. Although ferrets are legal as pets in New Zealand, the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society of New Zealand has been calling for a ban on pet ferrets in that country "[to reduce the significant threat to wildlife, and to humans](#)." Now in New Zealand, "[The Department of Conservation is reviewing the regulations which control the farming, breeding and sale of ferrets and which allow ferrets to be kept as pets. This review has been instigated because of concerns that controls on pet ferrets are too loose and that existing controls on breeding and sale of ferrets are being ignored.](#)"

"Keeping ferrets is no easy task and requires dedication. Only people who are prepared to give time and effort should consider having them as pets." "Some members of the Society offer a 'rescue service' to collect ferrets that have been abandoned, lost or just found wandering in search of food. One of the disheartening aspects of this is that we are often called upon to collect unwanted pets. It seems that the novelty of keeping an 'exotic' soon (sic) wears off." - [Information for Owners or Would be Owners of Ferrets](#) (U.K.)

"Over the past decade or so, ferret shelters and rescues started popping up in every state in the country. The devoted directors of these shelters have realized that there are many, many ferrets that are unwanted and either abandoned or left living in homes that don't really want them. Ferrets were considered a "fad" pet, especially in the 1980's, and many people rushed out, dropped \$100-\$200 for this "cool" pet, then the novelty wore off. Some people simply lost interest; others didn't realize the committment (sic) needed for a ferret. Whatever the reason, ferrets were in need of rescuing." - [Pennsylvania Ferret Rescue Association](#).

Domestic ferret as pets in states of the U.S. (see [1996-97 Nationwide Survey](#))

Other links on ferret pet keeping:

- ["Is A Ferret The Right Pet For You?"](#) - Oregon Ferret Association
- ["Is a Ferret Right for Me?"](#) - Ferret Information Rescue Shelter & Trust Society
- ["Your Ferret, A Lifetime's Commitment of Care"](#) - Massachusetts Ferret Friends, Inc.
- [Ferret Central](#)
- [Pet Ferrets - Pros and Cons](#)
- "Ferrets, a compendium in *Vade Mecum*, series for domestic animals." - [Lewington, J. H. \(1988\)](#)

Ferret Breeding in the U.S.

Ferrets are bred for fur, laboratory animals, and pets. Some small-scale breeders produce "[home-raised](#)" ferrets for sale as pets, although owners of pet ferrets are often warned about the [difficulties inherent in attempting to breed](#) their ferrets. Besides, most pet ferrets have already been sterilized before sale. Many are sterilized by 4 to 8 months of age, and some commercial breeders neuter them much earlier--by [6 weeks of age](#), or less. Most ferrets in the nation come from small and large-scale ferret [breeders or farms](#).

[Marshall Farms](#) in New York is the leading supplier in the U.S. of [laboratory](#) ferrets and [pet](#) ferrets. Such large-scale, commercial breeding has been criticized by some [animal rights activists](#) and [some](#) pet ferret advocates. Another large breeding farm is [Path Valley Farms](#), which breeds for pets only and not for research or fur.

Breeding of domestic ferrets in states of the U.S. (see [1996-97 Nationwide Survey](#))

Hunting Skills of Pet Ferrets

Pet Ferrets Kill Pests

- "*Pet ferrets will [kill mice and rats](#) indoors . . .*"
- "*Ferrets, while [in a household situation](#), will kill mice and keep the garden free of vermin.*"
- [How a pet ferret was taught to hunt muskrats](#)

Pet Ferrets Kill Household Pets

- According to [Jeans \(1994\)](#), ferrets will usually kill small bird and mammal pets.
- "*Pets that are [usually not a good idea to have around ferrets](#) are; birds, snakes, gerbils, hamsters, mice and rats. Ferrets are mousers by nature, and will attack and sometimes kill small rodents and birds. Snakes will see ferrets as prey, and the ferret does not usually come out the winner.*"
- [Concern over ferrets](#) loose in veterinary facilities.

Use of Pet Ferrets to Hunt Game

- In England, where use of ferrets for hunting is legal, [inexperienced house pets](#) can easily be trained to become good hunters.

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Other Carnivore Species Used as Pets

Cats and dogs, the most popular pets in the U.S., are carnivores, but most of the other popular mammal pets are rabbits or rodents (e.g., mice, rats, hamsters, guinea pigs). Domestic ferrets are carnivores, also. North American exotic pet breeders and promoters offer a long list of "hand-raised" wild carnivores as pets. Examples include wild cats (such as serval, caracal, Siberian lynx, Canadian lynx, bobcat, fishing cat, cougar), wild members of the dog family (fennec fox, bat-eared fox, black-backed jackal, [raccoon dog](#)), viverrids (civets and genets), mustelids (zorilla and otters) and [raccoons](#) and their relatives (coatimundi and kinkajou). All of these are restricted species in California and are not legal to possess as pets. The European polecat, which is the same species as the ferret, is also illegal to import or possess as a pet in California. The polecat, which "*can become extremely tame*" ([Wellstead, 1981, pp. 14-15](#)), is not usually a good candidate for pet keeping, but it is used by breeders to cross with ferrets to develop hybrids with certain traits.

Breeders offer an assortment of hybrid exotic cats, such as the "bengal", resulting from crossing domestic cats with wild cat species. Such hybrids, or purported domestic cat-wild cat hybrids, are not restricted in California and are treated as domestic cats.

There are advocates for keeping domestic minks and pen-raised "domestic" skunks as pets:

American Mink as a Domestic Pet

Promotion of ranch mink as pets stems from the breeding of mink for fur:

- American mink as a [domestic](#) animal
- Domestic mink as a [pet](#) animal

Striped Skunk as a Domestic Pet

Striped skunks are promoted and available as [pets](#), although possession of pet skunks is illegal in California and many other states. Skunks produced on [fur farms](#) are sometimes called [domestic skunks](#). [Pet skunk groups](#) have been formed, skunk breeders produce coats of a [variety of colors and stripes](#), and in the U.S. there are [skunk shows](#), similar to dog and cat shows. Some of the [issues](#) raised regarding pet ferret ownership (such as approval of a rabies vaccine and promotion of state legalization) are also of concern to advocates of pet-keeping of pen-raised domestic skunks.



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