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## To Breed or Not to Breed?

By Vickie McKimmey

"I think I want to start breeding ferrets!" Whoa there! Wait a minute! Take a deep breath and first ask yourself this question. Why do I want to breed ferrets? If your answer is 1) to make money; 2) so I don't have to buy ferrets; or 3) just to experience the joy of birth, please stop and reevaluate your decision. My best advice in these cases is do not attempt to breed ferrets.

If your answer(s) did not include one of those three responses, then please keep reading.

Before I started breeding, I had plenty of experience with ferrets. I had owned ferrets for several years, had started out as a rescue, was involved with my local ferret club, and had been attending ferret shows for at least 2 years. Breeding is definitely not something to be taken lightly. Established, credible breeders will not appreciate your attempt, no matter how enthusiastic, unless you have put in the time to acquire as much knowledge and experience first on general, basic ferret care and then on ferret husbandry. Trust me, there is no *Ferret Breeding For Dummies* book at your local bookstore. (I looked!). But there have been many 'dummies' who thought they were going to make tons of money by breeding ferrets. Not only did they find out the hard way, in almost all cases, their failed attempt ended up hurting their ferrets. Most were neglected, not having been cared for properly, and the kits were not handled or properly socialized. As a final step to get them out of their jam, they dumped the ferrets at their local animal control or ferret shelter. Personally, I feel ferret breeders should have no impact on the shelter community. If you are breeding more ferrets than you can place during the breeding season, that should be a wake up call to cut back. The responsible ferret breeder only produces as many ferrets as he or she can find suitable homes for during that season.

Following are some experiences from my 15 years of breeding ferrets and what I have learned.

Breeding ferrets is not as easy as breeding cats, dogs, rabbits or rodents. Are you willing to commit the amount of time and money that is necessary to maintain the health and well being of your ferrets and the kits that may come along? My short list of complications include the following

- The jill not going into labor or having difficulty delivering.
- The jill destroying or cannibalizing the kits.
- The jill producing no milk, not enough milk or not enough high quality milk.
- The jill getting mastitis.
- The jill getting E. coli mastitis, thus requiring immediate life-saving surgery to remove the infected gland(s).

These are all far more common than you think.

Are you on good terms with your vet and is your vet knowledgeable in basic animal reproduction? If you do not have a very experienced ferret vet, then you better take the time to find one and to work with him/her for a while before you start this adventure. Trust me here too: it will be an adventure! C-sections and E.coli mastitis gland removals follow Murphy's Law According To Ferrets - they must always be done on a weekend, late at night or both! Will your vet sell you all the items you will need to help with ferret deliveries? Lutalyse, Oxytocin, and Dopram are must haves for all ferret breeders. If you don't know what these are or how they are used, please, do some more research first!

Are you willing to make the time commitment both before and after you breed that jill? If your jill isn't producing enough milk or a high enough quality milk, you will need to know your options and be able to go immediately to plan B. There is no substitute for ferret milk for optimal kit development. You will have to get those babies to another lactating jill within 24 hours or most likely they will not survive; you can't start looking once the kits arrive. I hope you did your homework and already know who else has nursing kits about the same age as those you need to foster out.

Your ferrets are up-to-date on their vaccinations and were ADV tested prior to breeding; how about the breeder you are taking your kits to? One slip-up could expose your entire ferretty to ADV and shut you down.

Something else to consider: how willing is that breeder to take on the responsibility of nursing your babies for the next several weeks? Can that breeder's jill take on your kits without being overburdened and compromising the health of both litters? Let's say it's 10 p.m. on a Wednesday night. Can you leave immediately to get to the other breeder with the kits, or do you need to wait until morning? My best advice is to not wait. I have driven three to four hours, starting out at 10 p.m., to get to another breeder. Without a prior, established relationship with that breeder, do you know for sure it's okay to show up at two in the morning with those kits? Do you realize it could take an hour or more to make sure the new kits are accepted and the jill is okay with the new additions? If you're lucky, the kits are the same age as your kits - give or take a day or two. If your luck is even richer, your kits and the breeder's kits are different colors; if not, the kits will have to be marked so they won't get mixed up.

Another thing to consider is that the jill often becomes very maternal after delivery. Your sweetest little jill can become quite agitated whenever you disturb her and her babies. This is more common than not; she is just doing what nature taught her, and she needs to protect her babies. Often times, you won't be able to put your hand in the cage unless you have a diversion for her - a tube of Ferretvite or Nutrical works wonders here.

People also don't realize how very time-consuming just one litter of baby ferrets can be... especially after the mom stops cleaning them when they start on mush. It is not uncommon to have to completely clean the cage upwards of two times a day. Trust me, baby food and baby poop all over the place is not fun to clean. Especially once you find out when you get home from work that mom and the kits have been sleeping in the nice clean litter box you provided that morning and the rest of the cage is now a cesspool. Most likely you will be cleaning the cage, the mom and all the babies - what fun!

The babies have to be handled daily for training and socialization. Regardless of what you've experienced, baby ferrets have baby teeth and like to use them to teethe on things. It can really hurt when they, with their baby needle teeth, mistake your hand for food! Be sure to have safe things for them to teethe on and keep their bowl filled at all times. Otherwise, kits have been known to eat their bedding when they are hungry and/or bored.

Are you willing to seek medical attention if your jill or one of the babies is in trouble? In 2004, I had two jills start delivering after I helped them get started with a shot of Lutalyse. I gave them the shot at midnight and stayed up the next four hours, helping the one jill deliver ten babies - until one baby got stuck and stopped the others from coming out. With much coaxing and about an hour's worth of effort, the stuck kit was delivered, stillborn. But two more live kits followed and were fine.

While I was busy with the deliveries, the other jill was in a strong non-productive labor. From experience, I knew she was not going to be able to deliver any of the kits, so I knew I would be seeing my vet that

morning. I called in to let work know I was not coming in that day (oh, by the way, you can do that, right? Let's hope so!). Next, I called my vet's office and let them know I had an emergency and needed to get in as soon as I could. (It's very important that you can get in to see your vet at the drop of a hat for emergencies.) Once the vet saw the jill, he came to the same conclusion: she was not big enough to deliver the babies and a C-section was scheduled for that afternoon. All six babies were delivered alive. Since the jill didn't want to settle down, I decided to let my other jill tend to the six. My only problem was she had twelve of her own to tend to, and 18 babies on one mom was just too much. To make this long story short, I only lost three of the kits and was able to foster some over to another breeder's jill.

Do you have a handle on how to budget for overall costs? Vet checks, prenatal supplements for the jill, emergency vet visits, vet medications, whelping cage, kit-safe cage, kit litter box, kit food, mush food and it's components for the weaning kits, kit play pen, ferret baby toys, ferret kibble, litter, distemper and rabies vaccinations, ADV testing... So you have a litter of four kits and you want to keep two and place the others. Guess how much money you just lost? Was it really worth the endeavor?

Unfortunately, despite their extensive research via the internet or ferret groups, most new breeders are still unprepared for the reality. I've heard more horror stories than successes from people trying to breed who didn't have either the qualifications, the medical backup of a ferret-knowledgeable vet, or most importantly, a pre-established relationship with another breeder for guidance and support. A successful litter of ferret kits with no complications from conception to weaning the first time out is very rare. I can give the names of many breeders who have been doing this for years who still have never had that perfect run of luck.

If you are convinced this is something you are going to do, I recommend finding an established, reputable and credible breeder who will be willing to mentor you. Go through one breeding season with that breeder. You will not only learn from their experience, but also see first-hand the time and commitment that is involved. Be sure to follow their advice and take it slow. Most of all, good luck - you will definitely need it!