

## Ferretting for beginners

Contributed by Killit'n'Grillit

A cracking introduction to the downsizery way to get your bunnies from Killit'n'Grillit...

### Ferret needs

Ferrets are fairly low maintenance beasts, they require as a minimum shelter, food, water and stimulation. Shelter usually consists of a hutch, cub or court and should be sheltered from all the elements as much as is possible. Ferrets can stand the cold but heat and draughts can kill.

My set up has a hutch above a court but each to their own. Poo corner is mesh covered and has a removable tray filled with shavings etc. as ferrets are clean and will use the same place to relieve themselves.

The bedroom has a small entrance hole and the bedding can be straw, hay, shredded paper (good in the summer) etc. I tend to put a small layer of sawdust/shavings underneath to catch any moisture or blood from food that has been cached.

Underneath the living quarters I have a large open area filled with drainage-tubes, boxes, branches, all sorts of stuff to provide some stimulation and most ferrets need little to start them exploring and playing.

Food is paramount to the good health of ferrets and I believe in feeding them whole or paunched animals, but not carnivores. I'm also not keen, though others are, on scavengers (corvids etc). Dry processed foods specifically made for ferrets are a godsend in hot summers as they cut down on smells and flies, however if you have plenty of meat, mincing and freezing small portions that can be eaten in a day is also a good idea. Water is provided in the water bottles as if you put it in a bowl it won't stay clean for long.

Ferrets also like eggs as a treat, but I would keep it to no more than 1 or 2 a week and a drink of full fat milk is also devoured quickly. Some people have given, as treats, raisins and other odd things but mine seem to be happy with the partially digested stomach contents and I suspect they derive a lot of vitamins and other nutrients this way (yeuch).

As well as letting them run about through tubes etc. ferrets need to be handled daily (minimum) and I have even taken them for walks on a lead even though some have no inclination to do it. One small hob pulled like a beast possessed.

Finally veterinary needs. Accidents and illnesses occur and ferrets are cheap, I've yet to pay for one, but they need full care and we have a duty to care for them for as long as they live and small animals's bills are just as big as large animals.

Unless they are used in areas where there are rats likely they shouldn't need any vaccinations.

### Ferret types

Basically there are two, boys and girls or hobs and jills and other regional names. They come in many colours from dark polecat, sometimes called poleys, right through to Albinos. There are sandies, silver

mitts, blackeyed whites etc. etc. but one thing they all have is an instinct to hunt and if possible kill.

Hobs are much bigger and have the muscle to budge reluctant rabbits faster than jills but if you use nets hobs will not be able to get through like a jill would which we will cover later.

Jills come into season in early spring and will continue until late summer unless they are mated or given a jab to bring them out of oestrus. It is easily seen as their vulvas swell to an enormous size and tend to be quite moist. This can lead to infections and even death so you will have to have a litter of kits(not advisable)or get the vet to administer the jab or get the services of a vasectomised hob (a win win situation for all concerned).

Hobs and jills do tend to get along well together during the winter months but hobs start to come into season, easily detected by his aftershave(boy do they smell) and his descended testicles, earlier than jills and they will try to ravage the jills whether they`re in season or not and hobs aren`t tender lovers, they drag the poor jills around by their scruff until they bleed or give in.

If you decide to have both hobs and jills you will need to keep them apart throughout the summer months and this means not just in the next door hutch, they need to be far enough apart to be unable to smell each other.

L-R Sandy jill, poley jill, poley hob and albino jill.

## Ferretting equipment

Basically you need ferrets and a way of stopping the rabbits ,simple as that!

Nets, traps, dogs and guns are usually used. I don`t have any knowledge of the traps so I will deal with the other three.

Dogs are fast to use as you insert a ferret and wait for the rabbit to bolt and the dog catches it and retrieves it back to hand&hellip;easy. Well not really. If you are ferreting a hedge you need two dogs or risk the hound damaging itself diving through thorn and wire. Rabbits also have an annoying habit of dashing down a convenient hole to evade capture and will be harder to budge the next time the ferret finds them, which could mean a dig to a kill or a bottled up bunny (more of this later).The meat may also be damaged by the dog, but with a good dog or two and a hob this is a good set up.

Guns are similar to the above and it is not unknown for a ferret to be just behind or even on top of the rabbit as it exits so you could inadvertently shoot your ferret.

Netting is my preferred method as the rabbits are seldom bruised or punctured, however it has its drawbacks. It takes time to set the nets and you may have to walk over the burrow and therefore alert the occupants, who won`t want to bolt as easily as they might.

There are generally 2 types of net, purse nets which cover individual holes and long nets which surround the entire burrow.

Whichever method you use you will need a carry box of some sort for the safe carriage of your ferrets.

In addition to the above there are a few items which will make the day easier and are not strictly essential.

A priest or similar to kill rabbits cleanly with a knock on the head.

A sharp knife.

A spade for digging out ferrets that have either killed or are attempting to kill a rabbit below ground and for burying the rabbit guts afterwards.

Knee pads are a pleasure when netting as you are constantly kneeling to set nets or to listen for noise below ground and stop nasty infections from occurring as at sometime you will kneel on a thorn of some kind.

This is my basic kit.

A locating device, there are 2 main options: Firstly a ferret(usually a hob with an attitude problem)with a harness and line attached. The line has knots at yard intervals which are counted as the ferret enters the burrow until it stops. Very downsizer but slow and the ferret and/or line can become entangled on roots and rocks. Secondly the locator and collars which are expensive and require (expensive) batteries and can tangle in the nets if the ferret is in and out a lot. However it is the quickest method of finding a ferret and its rabbit and is virtually pinpoint accurate with very little experience.

Ferreting with nets

As shooting and the use of dogs is almost self explanatory I will continue with netting rabbits.

The easiest method of explaining this is to describe a typical day out, so here goes.

Get up nice and early and check the stinkers, if they aren't up get them up and handle them, as you will have done at least daily since you got them. Check to see if they've eaten and drunk and make sure they have. They should also empty themselves.

Check all your equipment. Make sure the carry box has fresh straw and take some water or milk for the ferrets. I use an old coffee jar lid to pour it into. Count how many purse nets you have as you will count them again before you leave the field. Spade, knife ,knee-pads, locator, priest and flask and sandwiches.

Check out the wind direction when you arrive at the field. You will be looking to work into or across the wind. This means the occupants of the burrows will be more inclined to leave. Look for signs of activity such as burrows that have been recently scraped out, footprints, fresh scrapes, poop and fur from fighting bunnies.

At a suitable distance, 10-20yds, put all your gear QUIETLY on the ground and walk upwind to the burrow with the nets. Place the peg fully into the ground and spread the net to cover the hole, ensure that the centre of the net is the first bit the rabbits head hits and then lightly push the net rings into the ground. This should ensure that when the rabbit hits the net it won't just push it out in front of it as the idea is for the net to move and partially entrap the rabbit before the lines start to move and this will make sure that the rabbit is fully caught. Next check that the net hasn't caught on the peg top as it will stop the net working and then move to the next hole and set the net as before. You may hear a rumbling sound below ground which means someone is home and knows you are there too! Once you have all holes covered, walk around and check you haven't missed any as you will on a few occasions and they are the ones that a rabbit will pop out of and disappear into the distance. Now go to the next nearest burrow and, if you have enough nets, net up there as well. There are two reasons for that, firstly it gives the first burrow time to settle down and secondly if a rabbit escapes the nets then it will probably go for the next nearest burrow and nets work both ways.

If you are using a locator and collar on your ferrets then spend a minute or 2 sorting it out now and remember to tape the battery and cap securely or it gets more expensive.

If you have a priest put it in your pocket along with a spare net. I like to use a free running uncollared jill if the burrow is not too big and if it's large I will put 2 in and use either a 3rd or a hob to find the errant jill when it hasn't been seen for a short while. If you imagine a small 6 hole burrow with holes close together, I would try a free running jill and let her try out the down wind hole first. This way she should be able to pick up the rabbits'scent easily. Move away from the holes and get low down so any rabbits that are lurking near the burrow mouths will not see you and should bolt quickly. Now comes the wait, a newbie ferret will go in slowly and may come back out or even faff about in the burrow mouth and tangle the net, but they soon get the idea.

It's hard to describe the noise as a rabbit hits the net at speed, but you shouldn't miss it. Walk quickly and quietly, around the warren if possible, grab the net lines and get a good hold in the hip area and kill the rabbit whilst in the net. Stick your foot in the hole to stop any more escapees.

I use a 'priest' which was made for me by a pal, but any sturdy piece of wood will work. Other people prefer to chin a rabbit, which is to hold the rabbit in the left hand (for a right handed person) thumb and forefinger(s) around the throat, ears pointing back along the wrist. With the other hand place your heel and palm under the chin and push smoothly back and up, this dislocates the vertebrae and kills the rabbit.

I personally don't use this method as sometimes the rabbit's head isn't between the meshes and means that it is in distress whilst you try to get its head.

Now lay the rabbit to one side and take a spare net out of your pocket and set it over the hole, remove the peg and take the dead rabbit still in the net back to where you were waiting.

If you leave the rabbit a few seconds its muscles will relax and it will be easy to remove from the net. Put a finger in each ring and pull away from each other and the rabbit will become easier to remove. Sometimes when you are going to pick up a rabbit in a net you will

see another bolt right behind it and if it heads for the other warren that you netted up you should get it (called back netting) after you have dealt with the first one.

Hopefully all your bolts will be like this but as we all know the world doesn't work like that, something will go wrong ! On the lowest end of the scale will be when the ferret goes down and after a minute or 2 will come back up and this will probably indicate an empty burrow. Lift the nets and leap frog them to the burrow after next or, if you have plenty of nets leave them down and net up further along. That way you can back net in both directions.

Perhaps the ferret doesn't come back for 15-20 minutes&hellip;&hellip;&hellip;don't worry, give it time. If you wait for a long time and your ferret doesn't come back or comes back up and has fur between its claws and/or blood on its muzzle there are a couple of things to do as it has almost certainly bottled up or killed a rabbit.

If you have gone for the downsizer option you will have to put a harness on another ferret, preferably a hob, and, with the line attached, count the knots as it goes into the burrow.

Eventually the movement back and forth will cease. If there was a jill still below the hob will get her out of the way and take over, so watch for her appearing.

To find out where the rabbit is you need to get down on hands and knees and look for the direction the hole goes or if there are thin, long sticks about try inserting one to detect the general direction the tunnel goes and if it has gone deeper. If the ferret is a good distance from the burrow mouth then you may have to dig a few test holes, the first the length of the stick into the burrow. A lot of ferreters use a probe to find the tunnel as they dig but I prefer to take my time. Once the tunnel and line are found you will have to again use the stick and find the direction it goes and eventually using the stick for direction and the length of line you will find the rabbit.

The techy way would be to collar another ferret and switch on the finder and follow it until it stops for a minute or more. The collar is a small radio transmitter and the finder a receiver and the knob on the side indicates the approximate distance the ferret is away. You simply fine tune it so that when the finder is moved a small distance away from the area it has indicated the clicking sound it makes stops. This number shows the depth below that the ferret is, now you need to dig down to it.

Sometimes as you are digging the ferret and rabbit will move a bit but generally it will be a small distance. Remember to take care as you are reaching the depth the finder has indicated as it is all too easy to break into the tunnel with too much force and it could have tragic consequences!

Once the ferret or rabbit is found you will have to be wary as there has been a battle to the death going on. Your hand is likely to get bitten by even the most biddable ferret and it has been known for rabbits to bite if you grab the wrong end. Put your hand in slowly and gently grasp the ferret and either move it away from the rabbit or remove it completely from the hole. Occasionally the ferret will have a good hold of the rabbit and will not relinquish it so you will have to remove both together. Otherwise grab the rabbit firmly around the hips and extract it and kill it ASAP. If it is possible stick a foot into the tunnel as there may be more bottled up in there. The most I've had is two but I have heard of up to eight from a very reliable source!!

What everyone fears most is a missing ferret and my advice would be to block all holes except one, which should have a baited cage trap placed in front, to catch the errant ferret. If you don't have a trap then all holes should be blocked and you will have to return the next day to excavate it.

### Rabbits things

Once the ferreting is finished you should turn your attention to the catch. First you should inspect the rabbits and then pee them, simply hold them by the fore legs belly away from you and pressing firmly with your thumb run it down the belly to the groin.

Next dig a deep pit and paunch the rabbits into it and check the livers for signs of fluke. The liver on the left has signs of fluke and should be disposed of, I prefer to burn if at all possible but deep burial is acceptable.

The old country way of hocking rabbits is handy to know. Simply insert a knife at the back of the achilles tendon and make a cut big enough to fit the other foot through. This way the rabbits can be hung up in couples on wire fences etc. to cool. The rabbits will need to be cooled somewhere that vermin/cats/dogs etc. cant get at. I use the rafters of my shed when there are just a few but some people find the stackable trays bread gets delivered in useful.

I hope this has given you an insight into ferreting and if you have any questions about anything I may not have covered or are unsure about just post a question in the &ldquo;Shooting and trapping for the pot&rdquo; section of the forum.