

Deaf Ferrets by Rebecca Stout

Presented October 3, 2003 Atlanta GA
2003 International Ferret Symposium®

OUTLINE

- I. Speech
 - A. Why deaf ferrets
 - B. Ferret health causes of deafness—ears, disease, infection, infestation, use of ototoxic drugs, trauma, genetic
 - C. Identification
 1. appearance
 2. behavior
 3. testing
 - D. Adapting to deaf ferrets, and helping them to adapt
 1. advantages and disadvantages of deafness
 2. special needs considerations
- II. Demonstration
 - Ask for an assistant
 - Set up ferret
 - Light switch training
 - Use of sign language to come
 - Use of flashlights and pointers to come

SPEECH

Hello, my name is Rebecca Stout... some of you may know me as “Wolfy”. Like Brett, I’m here to talk to you about deaf ferrets also, but I’ll be discussing them on another sort of level. I know by now, you might be wondering, why all this fuss about deaf ferrets today? There are many reasons why:

- Deafness can possibly be a clue that something might be wrong with your pet, such as illness, infestation, or injury.
- There’s a question of rising numbers of these animals. I really feel that with breeding for “fancy white markings” especially if coupled with some breeders limited bloodlines, that we are seeing far more deaf ferrets today than even just ten years ago. I can almost guarantee myself that if I walk into a pet store today that has more than a few ferrets for sale... one of them may potentially be hard of hearing or deaf. So, you, the ferret lover, are far more likely to run across them than you might think.
- As Brett has described, ferrets with certain white markings suggests possible neural crest disorder which signifies a potential syndrome of traits. It’s helpful for the ferret owner and shelter to be aware of this, since there are some other

health considerations. It's vital for a breeder to be aware of it since breeding these animals recklessly is really playing with fire.

- Since there may be unknown health factors with neural crest animals, since breeding them can be likened to a genetic ticking time bomb, and since it seems that these animals and deaf ferrets seem to be on a rise... we might even want to inspect if this is a growing problem that might need harnessing. I really must add something here however. I feel as if there are many private breeders out there who are aware of all this, and who therefore avoid breeding deaf ferrets. This is a tough decision. Make no mistake any pet store can tell you, the "fancies" outsell all others any day. There is a public demand for them. And as long as we the people buy them, you can't scowl at pet stores, breeders, and farms who deal with them.
- As far as the beloved hearing impaired ferrets out there, I have two concerns aside from the aforementioned. I want people to enjoy their experience with their pets as much as possible. I want them to bond and connect with them as much as possible. Awareness of the deafness and working on better communication can truly help this. Secondly, I worry about possible abuses of animals out there due to people that are unaware of the animal's special needs. If an animal doesn't react or behave how one expects, no matter how kind the person thinks they are, there are constant stresses put onto the pet day in and day out. Imagine being expected or even demanded to perform an ability that you do not have. Imagine people thinking you are stupid because they don't know that you can't hear. Imagine living with their constant frustration because you can't hear. It's tough, and it can even end up quite ugly.

Since hearing loss on some occasions can signify a red flag, let's look at causes of deafness. Now believe it or not, this can be geographical. So be aware of where you live and note what might be common causes in your area. Some countries tend to breed for fancy lines and some areas might have limited lines to breed from... so genetic causes might be number one there. This is debatable, but I wonder if America falls under one of these categories in some part. Some countries vets, as well as some vets in remote areas within this country, still are not very aware of what drugs out there are ototoxic and may cause deafness. For example some parts of Canada have vets that still privately confess to using gentamycin on baby ferrets. This is a very common antibiotic that can cause deafness even in dogs and human infants. Some areas are more prone to infestation and disease that might cause deafness. Ear mites, infections, disease, can all possibly cause deafness when not treated promptly. And of course, the one cause of deafness, that can happen anywhere to anyone to any type of ferret... is traumatic injury. So, you see it's good to identify a deaf ferret, if anything to make sure that the deafness itself is not a secondary condition to something more serious.

So how do we spot them? How do we identify these?

We can glance at them visually. Is the animal a marked white? Does the animal have lots of white splotching such as bibs, mitts, irregular patches on knees and tails? These markings might be a good reason to test. If the animal is a blaze, I can tell you that the

incidence of deafness is at least 50% and is usually higher. If the animal is a panda, and was born a panda (and not a blaze or otherwise that faded), they are usually deaf, and profoundly so.

We can look for some behaviors, though this is not a good indicator. All animals are different. But I thought I'd mention them nonetheless. Some deaf ferrets have none of these, some all of these. The behaviors I will talk about are just some common observations of mine and others:

Fearlessness of water, or no reaction to splashing and running water. Little to no reaction to sudden sounds. Sensory seeking activities... the animal may be more exploratory, might dig more, might mouth things more, might want to lie on and feel different textures more. Other possible excessive behaviors you might notice can be social such as if your ferret is somewhat of a loner, is often misunderstood by other ferrets, they might make a screeching or screaming type of noise when playing or upset, they might vocalize oddly and endlessly, or might the opposite... they might be mute. Other unique behaviors can be that they might cling onto and over mother a stuffed toy. An interesting action some may do is head flipping. They might like to flip their head upside down and backwards. Someone once said this looks like a pez dispenser when you hold them. But these things are so subjective... and these are things that I've noticed as well as some other owners, these are nothing proven at all. Just observations on my part is all.

The only way to know if a ferret is deaf is to test them. Believe it or not, some of the most reliable testing begins in the home. When a ferret is over-stimulated by odors, sites and vibrations at a vet's office, sometimes it takes a sonic boom to get their attention. At home, you can take your animal to an empty, quiet room where there are no other animals to cue off of, where there are no vibrations, and no smells to help them pick up on your tests. They will be less distracted. When you test a ferrets hearing, make sure that you use all frequencies. So many people test loud, louder, and loudest, rather than low to high pitch. Many deaf or hearing impaired animals can hear the tinkling of keys, but not your voice... Or be able to hear a car horn go off, but not a squeaky toy. Number one thing to remember, make all noise behind yours or the ferrets back. Do not let them feel vibrations on the floor or in the air, do not let them see you moving and doing anything interesting to them. Also, test over many different days. Once you animal is identified, it's a good idea to take them to a vet's office to make sure of the dx and to make sure your animals is healthy.

So many people feel a sudden sadness or disappointment when the find out their pet is deaf. I know I certainly did. It's normal if you go through some feelings like that. I had to continually remind myself that this animal has never known anything different... That my ferret was happy, and that my ferret was just as ferrety as any other ferret. Right? I looked at the advantages. Deaf ferrets seem to love the outside more and don't spook too easily. They are fun to take around. Deaf ferrets are not afraid of running water or splashing so they like to play in water more in some cases. Deaf ferrets are fun to create a special bond with. The only disadvantage to us might become apparent during

emergency times. When you must find your ferret, such as during escapes, or during emergencies in the home. Even so, much of that can be compensated for with good training. So that leaves only one major disadvantage here, and that is when the animal comes from a chaotic history of bouncing from owner to owner, from neglectful times, or from abusive owners. A ferret that is deaf, can startle easily, and given a bad situation this can lead to biting. A deaf ferret that is unsocialized and who feels unstable can be tough to rehab as biters. It takes lots of patience and consideration of their special needs to do so.

What can you do to build your animals trust, and to build your bond? Contact, socialization, and calmness. Be consistent. Hold your pet, touch your pet, brush your pet, and yes, talk to your pet as much as you can. Stay calm even if your pet makes a mistake and bites. I'm not an expert about biting, as I've only dealt with one severe biter, and she was not deaf. I can tell you that people report to me that they like trying the basic training for deaf ferrets first when they have a problem... the scruffing, making a mad face and dragging approach. When this doesn't work, some people try time outs. But I think when you have a deaf biter that isn't just a rambunctious baby, the best approach might be to treat them as fear biters. And that requires a lot of time and patience with your handling. It takes a ton of TLC.

On to happier things. Establishing a bond with a deaf ferret can be so much fun. Many are capable of learning a few large gesture signs. Commands such as "come" for example. These animals are smart and can learn tricks just the same as a hearing ferret. Most importantly, they love and play like a hearing ferret. When you are first getting used to each other, it helps to make some special adjustments for their deafness. The tiniest of considerations such as stomping the floor, hitting the cage side, or blowing on the ferrets fur before touching them helps to alert them that you are there and helps them from startling. Whichever cue you choose, make it a consistent one, so they don't get afraid. If your ferret is used to you blowing on their fur to wake them, don't tap the cage or do different things each time. Make his life stable.

DEMONSTRATION

© 2004 by the International Ferret Congress. All rights reserved. This document may be distributed so long as no profit is made and this copyright notice is included in full.