

Choosing a Breeder

Recently I had the opportunity to compare two twelve-week-old male kits. Both of these kits were bought by experienced ferret owners, had been fed an identical diet of high quality pet food, and had been trained using generally accepted methods. One, bought from a large mainstream breeder, was a large and well behaved ferret with a wonderful nature. The other, bought from an illegal back-yard breeder in Auckland suburbia, was 40% smaller and starting to exhibit behavioural problems. This observation underlined the importance of getting it right when buying a new kit.

Large professional breeders are able to be very selective in their breeding operations. Because of the scale of their operation, they are able to breed from only the best stock, and are able to systematically eliminate genetic flaws and undesirable traits in their ferrets. A buyer should therefore expect to get a good quality kit from a large professional breeder.

Small scale breeders, on the other hand, are much more restricted in their selection of breeding stock. Decisions regarding the selection and retention of breeding stock are also influenced to a much greater extent by emotional factors— after all they are generally breeding from family pets. So what should a buyer ask when selecting a breeder for their next kit?

- Ask to see the kit's lineage. A good breeder should be able to show you the kits lineage back through several generations, and they should be able to explain the rationale behind the breeding decisions – what traits they were trying to promote or eliminate at each generation.
- Ask where they got their breeding stock. Did they get quality stock from established breeders, or have they just cobbled together a group of ferrets from anywhere they can.
- Ask to see the parents - this might give some indication as to how your ferret might turn out. A breeder who is unwilling to show you the parents of a kit probably has good reasons.
- Ask for the contact details of other owners who have previously bought ferrets with the same or similar lineage. A good breeder should have large numbers of satisfied customers willing to vouch for the quality of their ferrets.
- If the kit has been vaccinated, ask for a vaccination certificate. Vaccination for ferrets



is a complex issue in New Zealand, as we know of no vaccines available here that have been formally tested and approved for use on ferrets. Instead vets are forced to use puppy vaccines, and it has been suggested that some of these may cause adverse reactions in some ferrets. If a kit has been vaccinated, find out what vaccine was used, and discuss the reliability of this vaccine with a ferret experienced vet.

- Ask to see the breeders license, and check that the license actually applies to the address that the breeder is operating from. If the breeder has not been licensed by the Department of Conservation, then they are operating illegally.

In reality you will have difficulty finding a small scale breeder in New Zealand who will meet all of the above conditions, so before buying a ferret you need to consider what factors are most important to you. Properly checking out a breeder may take some time, but when you buy a kit, you are acquiring a companion that you hope to have with you for the next 8-12 years.

By John Chessum, Ferret PAWS (NZ) Inc President



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