

The Litterbox Battle

The litter box habits of our wily weasels can be extremely frustrating. It's a constant struggle to diligently watch for that distinctive combination of backing up with tail-lift to interrupt the process before the bomb has been dropped. This hand-out will talk about some of the strategies that may help you achieve victory more often than defeat in the litter box battle.

If you only have one ferret, the battle shouldn't be too formidable. Hopefully your pet was left with its mother long enough to learn litter box basics from her. Once home, your kid may need a few reminders to put him back on track. It is helpful to start out with a small enclosure so there is only room for the litter box, food, and a sleeping area. Fasten the desired depository securely to the side of the cage. Once your ferret is consistent about using the appropriate place to defecate in this situation, you can gradually increase the size of the living space. If the little guy starts backsliding:

- Try attaching some bedding to the contested area to discourage its use as a bathroom.
- Attach an additional food container near the disputed spot.
- Fasten some type of toy or other object to make the site an unsatisfying place to poop. We have used a plastic soda container filled with water wedged in the corner, a large toy clipped to the bars, a scrub brush with the bristles toward the inside of the cage, and an empty oatmeal container wired in place.
- Experiment with different litter box filler (wood stove pellets, recycled paper pellets, plant-fiber pellets, shredded paper, or paper towels), different litter containers (sweater boxes, dish-washing pans). Most adult ferrets refuse to use the small triangular corner litter pans.

Even if your pet hits the target every time in his cage, it will be a challenge to persuade him to adhere to this behavior when he is allowed to roam outside the cage. Here are some battle plans:

- Always reward your ferret after he successfully uses the litter box. The reward can be a toothsome treat, praise and attention, or playtime out of the cage (watch for academy award-winning acting).
- Always wait until your ferret uses the litter pan in its cage before letting him out to play (this is a lot easier said than done if you have more than one or two ferrets or limited time to monitor the state of the litter box).
- If your ferret has just woken up or is caught "backing into a corner," repeatedly put him into the litter pan until he accomplishes his mission (this often turns into a contest of who is the more stubborn).
- Sometimes it helps to "move things through their system" if they get to run around a little first. Try taking them outside on a leash before letting them run free inside and they may defecate outside after a few minutes of activity.

So, if you are fortunate, your ferret has pooped before running rampant through the house. How long is the carpeting safe from another assault? Usually only one hour tops! What other strategies can help eliminate the possibility of a land mine?

- When outside of the cage, let the ferrets choose the areas they prefer and place litter pans in those locations. If they choose an inappropriate spot, use the same strategy as in the cage (bedding, food, toys, objects to make it difficult or unpleasant to poop there).
- Keep litter pans clean, but leave some of the old litter and feces as a signpost that lets your ferret know its appropriate use.
- Clean any accident spots well (rubbing alcohol, vinegar, or enzymatic deodorizer).

If all else fails, surrender. There are certain situations that will inevitably result in missing the desired target. When adding a new ferret to the group, poop "wars" often occur, or the new kid on the block shows your well-trained troops how much fun it is "to poop where no ferret has pooped before." Some individuals use feces as a way to express their feelings when denied something they want. Look the other way and try the following suggestions:

- Put down layers of paper towels, newspaper, absorbent pads, plastic floor runners, or plastic place mats and hope they hit the general area.
- Get a mini rug shampoo machine (the Little Green Clean Machine by Bissell can be found at Fred Meyer or Costco for around \$80).

If you have additional questions about ferrets, please contact the Oregon Ferret Association, PO Box 90682, Portland, OR 97290, (503)306-2968 (voicemail, www.oregon-ferret.org).

This article courtesy of the Cascade Ferret Network www.cascade-ferret.org