

**Zodiac's Product  
Roundup:**

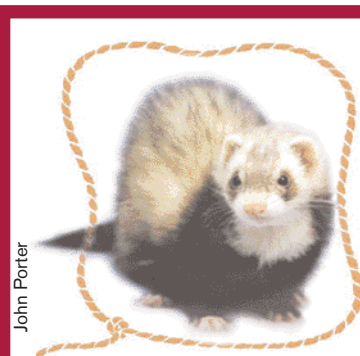
# Cages & Carriers



Reneé Stockdale

# Zodiac gives us a ferret's-eye-view on comfy critter cages and carriers.

By Erika Matulich, Ph.D., and Zodiac The Ferret



*Hi! My name is Zodiac, and I'm a ferret who lives with my mom and dad (the humans) and a ton of other ferrets. Personally, I don't think I need a cage, as I am an exceptionally smart ferret who has an exploring agenda each day. I seem to get in trouble a lot in my explorations (through no fault of my own, of course), so Mom puts me away in a cage when nobody is home but us ferrets.*

## Do Ferrets Need Cages?

Hello! I am Zodiac's mom, and I'll be adding my thoughts about cages. When I thought about having a ferret as a pet, I envisioned a free-roaming ferret that had the run of the house at all times. Why should I spend money on a cage? I quickly found out that ferrets are highly intelligent and curious creatures that get into a lot of trouble if left to their own devices. And I wasn't alone in my discovery.

"A cage provides a safe and secure environment for the ferret when you cannot be there to supervise play," said Barbara Ludt, a ferret shelter operator in Florida. "A cage can also be helpful for a ferret to rest and overcome illness."

A small cage also can be used for transportation (although a carrier would be better — we'll talk about those later).

When I brought my first ferret, Critter, home more than 15 years ago, I had all the best intentions and did all the wrong things. This was because not enough was known back then about how best to keep a ferret.

I let Critter roam about the apartment, and it didn't take long for her to unload kitchen cabinets, dig up houseplants, get stuck under the water heater, put holes in the screens, and turn on the disposer and leave it running. One afternoon, I came home to

find her precariously stuck like Velcro on the wall (conveniently hung with a bamboo covering that allowed climbing *up* but not down). At this point, a cage was in order!

At a pet store manager's recommendation, I brought home a 30-gallon aquarium with a wire top, a water bottle and a bag of hamster wood shavings. Today I know how wrong I was: Ferrets should not be housed in aquariums (there is not enough ventilation), and they need litter boxes and washable bedding, not wood shavings.

## Caging No-Nos

*I am such a lucky ferret because I live in a palatial four-story cage outfitted with everything to keep me comfy. It must be my reward for being such an exceptionally good ferret!*

*I talked to my ferret buddies, and they told me all about other cages they had to live in before they were rescued by Mom and Dad. Chester reported that he was put in a parrot cage, and the bars were wide enough for him to crawl partially through and get stuck. Nicolette said she lived in a wooden box that smelled awful. Tito lived in a cage meant for a hamster and was really cramped.*

As you can tell by my ferrets' experiences in their "past lives," plenty of cages will not suit ferrets. Avoid wood, which absorbs ferret odors and is difficult to clean. Once again, glass aquariums (or any solid material that restricts ventilation) should not be used. Many dog crates and parrot cages are unsuitable because the wire spacing is too large; wires should be no larger than one inch apart on the shortest side. Cages designed for small rodents — such as hamsters, chinchillas or guinea pigs — may be too small.

## Caging Considerations

*As an experienced ferret, I can tell you that bigger is better when it comes to cages. I need plenty of room*



The way it will be used and the number of occupants it will hold determines the size of the cage needed — and bigger is usually better.

to climb around, keep busy and check out the world. My four-story cage is just right for me. If I wanted to, I could share this cage with a few other ferrets, but right now I am glad that all those other ferrets have their own cages.

John Porter

Ferrets have specific needs, so you should look for a cage designed for a ferret. Ferret cage manufacturers

study the behaviors of the ferret so they can design a safe and fun cage specifically for the species. Cages made for other animals do not mentally challenge the ferret and could have safety problems.

The type of ferret cage you choose depends on several factors. First, how many ferrets do you plan to house? The absolute minimum size for one ferret is two cubic feet (12 by 24 inches bottom, and 12 inches high). This assumes that the ferret is out playing most of the time and is seldom restricted to the cage. I find that this cage size is best as a hospital recovery ward or a travel cage. If you add more ferrets to the picture or need to cage your ferret for long periods while you are away at work, start increasing the size.

From a ferret's point of view, bigger is better, just like Zodiac says! One option is to look for expandability. Some cages have removable wire panels so another story can be attached to the top. Another option is cages with plastic tubing systems. These plastic tunnels can attach to an additional cage, allowing for easy expansion as the ferret family grows.

Sometimes more levels might not be better. "Keep in mind that older fer-



Soft-sided carriers provide a safe way to transport your ferret for short distances, such as a visit to the veterinarian or a nearby relative.

rets may not want to make the effort to climb the additional stories," said Mike Runyon, an experienced ferret owner in Texas.

### Convenience & Safety

*One feature I really like about my cage is that it sits on a giant plastic tray, which means if I drop a treat, I can go get it! I also like the fleece floor mat on the bottom that is nice and soft under my feet. Some solid plastic shelves in the cage hold my treat and water bowls. The best part is all the hammocks! I can go all over my cage from hammock to hammock until I find just the right one to sleep in for the night.*

All ferret cages should contain some sort of bottom pan or tray that is easy to clean. Ideally, the floor of the cage should not be wire, because this can cause foot injuries and deformities. If there is a wire bottom (or wire platforms higher in the cage), cover the wire with linoleum, tile or washable carpeting (bath mats work great). Several manufacturers offer washable

platform covers.

Make sure that any shelves or platforms are wide enough to allow room for a sleep sack or litter box. Some wire ramps that come with cages may be steep, and ferrets may have accidents by catching body parts on the wire as they tumble down. To avoid this problem, make

ramps less steep, weave a towel scrap between the ramp wires, or take out the ramps and provide enough hammocks to stairstep the ferrets to the next level.

Some cages use plastic tubing rather than ramps. Whether or not your ferret will use the tubing is up to the

### Cage Choice Do's & Don'ts

#### Do seek out:

- Wire mesh cages of galvanized (good) or coated (better) wire
- Heavy-duty latches to prevent escapes
- Doors large enough to remove litter boxes, ramps and shelves
- A solid tray cage floor that is easy to clean
- Solid shelves that are easy to clean

#### Other options to seek:

- Wheels or casters
- Ability to easily collapse cage for transportation or storage
- Ability to connect to other cages or an expandability option
- Athletic challenges, such as ramps, ladders, shelves, etc.

#### Don'ts

- Wood. Most woods absorb bacteria and pose health and odor problems.
- Sharp edges or burrs on any wire
- Wire floor surfaces and wire shelving that can trap ferret parts and cause injury
- Uncoated/nongalvanized wire that quickly rusts
- Mesh size larger than one inch — larger sizes will either trap ferrets or allow them to escape.
- Flexible-wire door panels with a center latch — ferrets can push at the corners and escape.

# Cages made for other animals do not mentally challenge the ferret and could have safety problems.



ferret. Finally, every cage should have plenty of big access doors so you can reach every level and easily take a litter box (or ferret) in and out.

For your convenience, larger cages benefit from wheels or casters to help move them; make sure that the wheel size can handle the cage weight.

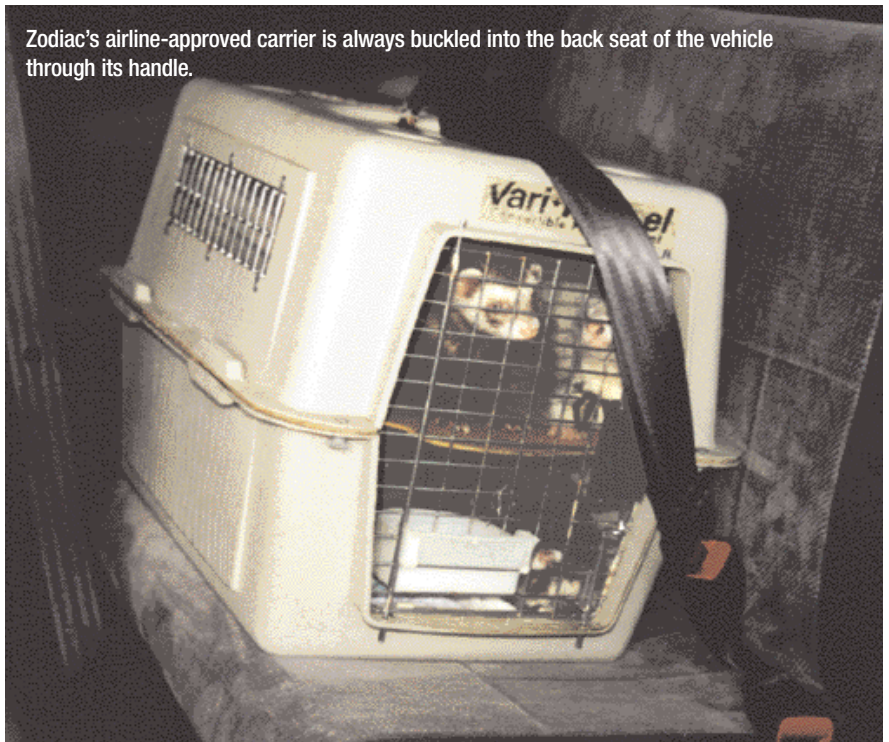
### What About Wire?

*My cage comes in a lovely decorator black. The wires are enameled with this color to provide a long-lasting finish that I can't chew through. The cage is so nice for me to climb around in because there are no sharp edges anywhere. At the veterinarian's place, I stay in a fancy cage with shiny stainless-steel bars.*

There are many types of cage wire: galvanized, enameled, powder-coated (a baked-on finish), stainless steel and polycoated vinyl wire. Coated wire is the easiest to clean, but if your ferrets gnaw on the wire, the coating can come off and be swallowed accidentally. Galvanized wire is the least expensive but is more difficult to keep

clean and rust-free. Galvanized wire cages must be completely scrubbed and dried before housing a ferret to remove the potentially toxic zinc parti-

cles. Stainless steel is often the most expensive but the least subject to wear and tear. Enameled or powder-coated wire is somewhere in the mid-



John Porter

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dle on cost and maintenance issues. For any type of wire, make sure that no sharp edges or exposed ends could cut you or your ferret (door areas need special attention).

### Interior Decorating

Now that you have the right cage, what about the right stuff? You will need a litter box, litter, a water bottle, a drip catcher for the water bottle, food dishes or feeders, hammocks and sleep sacks. You also will need flooring material (I use washable fleece dog crate liners). In general, look for cage accessories that are safe, durable and easy to clean.

Strategically hang hammocks in the cage so that if a ferret falls, it won't go far and will land on a soft hammock. The rule of thumb is a minimum of 1.5 hammocks per ferret, rounded up to the nearest whole number. (*Zodiac here – you'll know how spoiled I am when I tell you that I have seven hammocks all to myself!*)

Put sleep sacks on the bottom floor or on platforms. You may need extra litter boxes on your platforms. For multiple ferrets, multiple water bottles and food dishes are handy; the kind that clip onto the side of the cage are especially useful. Some wonderful "cage kits" give you a head start on a bundle of these items, so check them out. Ferrets also have fun with tubes and tunnels (either fabric or plastic) that can be hung in the cage.

### Exterior Decorating

*As such a pretty ferret, I really need my beauty rest. I'm glad that my cage is in its own room away from that noisy television and the temptations in the kitchen. If I want to, I can look out a distant window and bounce from floor to floor in my cage, but mostly I like to relax, stretch and find just the right hammock to sleep in.*



Reneé Stockdale

Multiple stories are an excellent cage option for most ferrets, unless illness or old age cause difficulty moving between levels.

"If you put the cage in a busy area of your home, your ferret will only want to come out and play with you and feel trapped [whenever it's caged]!" said Linda Mullen, a ferret owner in Illinois. Place your ferret's cage in a quiet zone of the house, because the cage should be used for rest and relaxation. For fun time, your ferret should be out of the cage, zooming around with you.

Do not place the cage in direct sunlight or by a window that might radiate heat. Similarly, don't place the cage by a radiator, heating vent or other draft. Ferrets cannot withstand heat well. Temperatures greater than 80 degrees Fahrenheit can send your ferret into heat exhaustion within minutes.

Natural lighting also is a must. Preliminary studies indicate that lots of artificial light that extends the "day-

light" hours of a ferret might lead to medical problems.

### Travels with Zodiac

*I really love my four-story palace! I wish Mom could take it along when we go on trips, but it doesn't seem to fit in the car. This means I get a whole other travel cage to myself – my carrier! It's not nearly as big, though, and it has only one hammock and one sleep sack. I sure would like to explore the inside of the car, but Mom won't let me. She told me the story of Gizmo, who got loose in the car and wound up shivering in the air conditioning system!*

For local travel, ferrets should never roam free in a car because they can get under the brake pedal or behind the dash. For short car trips, a variety of convenient options are available. Soft-sided carrying bags are lightweight and comfortable. Additionally, a variety of small cages designed specifically for ferrets fit easily in car back seats.

For a temporary cage or carrier, avoid cardboard boxes. Zodiac can shred through the sturdiest of boxes long before we get to the vet, and the


## Stainless steel is often the most expensive but the least subject to wear and tear.

cardboard soaks up liquids, making a soft area even easier to dig out. In an extreme emergency (such as fire or other disaster requiring evacuation), you can put a ferret in a pillowcase if you need to quickly transport it without a carrier.

For long car trips or if you are moving to another household, you will need larger and more durable accommodations than a small cage or soft carrier. Look for features like handles, multiple stories, ramps and deep trays – but keep in mind that it must fit in the back seat of a car.

Airline-approved carriers are a good alternative for ferrets (that's what Zodiac has). The medium- and intermediate-sized carriers can be fitted with hammocks or lofts to provide more room (and entertainment) for a travel-weary ferret. Zodiac and I recommend airline-approved carriers because they are sturdy, long-lasting, and easy to clean. The best-quality carriers are certified by the United States Department of Agriculture and the International Air Transport Association.

## Happy Homecoming!

Ferrets are active, intelligent escape artists that need to be caged for their safety when unsupervised. While caged, they need plenty of room for exercise, fun activity and household furnishings. All ferrets will need to travel at one time or another (such as a trip to the vet), so plan ahead with a good travel carrier. 

**Erika Matulich** is a professor at the University of Tampa in Florida and the former president of the Ferret Lovers' Club of Texas. She is a Certified Small Animal Specialist by the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council. She is a frequent contributor to *Ferrets*, *Ferrets USA* and *Critters USA* magazines and was the contributing ferret editor for *Pets.com*. Matulich is the proud owner of six ferrets.

**Kodiak's Precious Zodiac Bear** is a sable mitt sprite and daughter of Precious (dam) and DAF Kodiak Bear (sire). She was born at Bandit's Beggars and Thieves in Texas. Her hobbies include pandemonium, weasel work and busybody business, accompanied by intense treat begging, sock stealing and human training.

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