

# THE LABBIES

Can you believe there is actually a book called “The Laboratory Ferret,” published by CRC Press in 2012? It includes chapters on the biology and anatomical features of *Mustela putorius furo* and caging requirements as described in the National Research Council’s Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals. It contains information on the potential for zoonotic diseases, those that can be passed between animals and humans. It even details veterinary care for ferrets and mentions the need for multiple ferrets to be housed together as social animals. What is omitted from all this regulatory and medical information is their need for play and love!

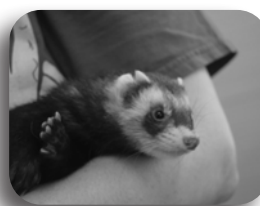
Most of all, a “labbie,” a ferret formerly utilized for research, needs play and love! According to L. Vanessa Gruden, Executive Director, Ferret Association of Connecticut, “In a typical year, 6,500 ferrets live in medical research laboratories in the United States. In 2020, due to Covid research, that number jumped to nearly 10,000.” She added, “We call these little survivors ‘labbies.’ With care, they are just like every other ferret: happy, playful & loving.”

Gruden elaborated, “Ferrets may be used in hospitals, universities, or biological / pharmaceutical facilities focused on animal or human research. Ferrets may also be kept at veterinary colleges for student training purposes. Ferrets are used to research respiratory and viral diseases (especially the flu); gastrointestinal issues; brain injuries; and reproduction, among other health disorders.”

She further claimed that “Hard numbers are not available, but anecdotal evidence suggests only 1-2% (65-100 ferrets) are typically released for adoption. Releasable ferrets will not have undergone invasive testing or been infected with any agent that could pose a risk to the public. Many may simply be “spares.” Ferrets usually spent little time outside a cage and must learn how to live in a home. Some are distrustful and scare easily or bite, but all can be rehabilitated by experienced handlers.”

Holly and Joy made their way to Claudia Johnson, operator at the Oxford Ferret Rescue in Pennsylvania. While petite, these two ferrets are beautiful! Johnson described that they are taking some time to adjust and will need a special home, one without children. They are not good candidates for a free roam home because they are excellent at hiding! She said, “At first, they slept in their tubes but eventually took toys into the tubes.” She claims they are “perfect” with the litter box. They are playful and energetic but do not like returning to the cage after time out of it. Go figure! Johnson said that these two ferrets will need an experienced owner who is willing to help them re-adjust and terms them a “Work in progress.”

Recently, some labbies made their way from a research facility to several rescues on the east coast. This was possible because, as Gruden shared, “Some facilities have internal adoption processes; small numbers of ferrets may be adopted by researchers, interns, or students.” In general, though, “Due to harassment from extremist animal activists, laboratories avoid publicly discussing research using animals. It can be difficult to obtain direct contact data for researchers and/or institutional animal welfare oversight committees.” Gruden explained.



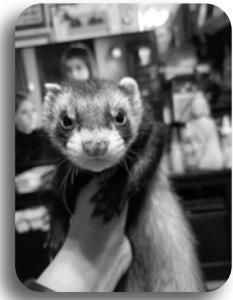
Fortunately for the labbies recently released, Gruden’s collaboration paid off. She said, “A laboratory may agree to work with a trusted outside rescue organization such as the Beagle Freedom Project. The Ferret Association currently works with two different research facilities. In 2022, the Ferret Association had 34 ferrets released to us. We partnered with other shelters to take 17 of those. When released, ferrets may or may not be altered, descented, or up to date on vaccinations. Thus far, we’ve been able to provide financial aid for shots, microchips, and spay/neuter. We do not allow descenting if not already done.”

Bonnie Russell, shelter operator of Washington Metro Area Ferret Outreach (WMAFO) in Maryland, first heard about these labbies when Gruden reached out to several shelters to participate in accepting the research ferrets. Since all involved were not certain about when the labbies were to be released, Russell was on standby. When it did happen, she took in four and Claudia Johnson of Oxford Ferret Rescue in Pennsylvania also took two of them.

Prior to making it to WMAFO, another shelter in Georgia, Kindness Matters, served as a temporary stop in their journey and then, they traveled to Nirvana Ridge Ferret Rescue in Virginia where Karen Lamb is the operator. So many shelters and people involved demonstrating that it takes a true team with the love for ferrets to make an operation like this successful!

The ferrets that arrived at WMAFO were “very tiny and frightened,” described Erica Hohing, a mainstay volunteer at the WMAFO. The ferrets were quarantined for a few weeks. Two were adopted by Anna Marie Weber. But one of the labbies allowed Hohing to pick her up although at

first, she seemed panicked and clung to her hand. Enamored of the little ferret, Hohing adopted her.



Adira was the name Hohing chose for the labbie she took home. The name means strong, noble or powerful in Hebrew. To go along with this moniker, is the nickname, Spicy Taco. When she met one of Hohing's other ferrets, Jason, she immediately became dominant to the extent that he tried to push her away! When she met the Earl of Cromwell, so named for the locale from which he and

many other ferrets were rescued, he became her favorite. As far as other ferrets in the business, Adira is not a fan of the only other female, Fey, but gets along with Freddie.

At first, Adira was frightened by any noise and she had no interest in treats. Seriously? As time has passed, she will now respond to the sound of the treat container. And, in true ferret form, she eats soupies! Erica describes her as "She gets into things, manipulates things and is smart! She gets away with this because of the cute looks she gives." She instigates stash contests with the other ferrets, hiding toys in the tunnels. She is hard at work, learning to be ferrety and not a research subject.

There was one other WMAFO labbie whose story must be shared... see the sidebar to learn about Vertical Vera, an agile little albino living her best life with Jessie Nolan.



Gruden continues to be involved in getting labbies released and, as she describes it, "Research labs are located across the country. To grow capacity to help more released ferrets, the Ferret Association [of Connecticut] is seeking additional partner shelters. In certain situations, it may be possible for an individual to adopt either directly through us or the nearest partner shelter.

If readers are interested in helping former laboratory ferrets, please contact the Ferret Association at: [info@ferretassn.org](mailto:info@ferretassn.org).

From the POV of a labbie:

Feel Like a #?  
NOT ANY MORE  
I been SPRUNG.  
I am FREEEEEEEE.

And I have a name and a home and a mommy and da bestest comfy snuggle bedding and TOYS, Lots & Lots of TOYS. noisey toys shakey toys...but I get ahead of myself. I'm new at this stuff.

Before, I didn't have extra things to stimulate my busy brain... well, I had bbyz, but they took alla them away... I didn't get to play with them. I just made sure they were fed and clean & warm and I potty trained them... my mommy says she cannot believe I had baby's, cuz I am just a Wee Mite.

I told her I might be a Wee Mite; but, I'm a MIGHTY MITE.

I try to prove it as much as I can too.

When mommy first saw my foto she had a tingly thing in her brain... it helped her know I was telling her my name... which is Vera.

A few days after I came home, she added another name... due to my daring do and energetic movements... in the upward direction... Now, she calls me, "Vertical Vera"

She was checking to see if the Flying Wallendas were missing a troupe member.

I LOVE to run & hop and I go airborne in a tuck & roll ..thats fun.

I also sing and dance... a lot.

I should audition for America's Got Talent.

I saw that online... when I took mommy's fone to Google

Ellie Mae Clampett... and see why she can play in her Cement Pond but I can't play in my Ceramic Pond.

See, mommy wanted me to make friends..she thought that I could be eased into not being afraid of other ferrets after those Cray Cray Gremlins.

PINZ was gonna be my friend cuz he's everybody's friend..but now's he's friends with the Angels.

He did gib me my most favorite toy ever.

Its a BLOO stuffed Elefant, with a lil blankee from his real daddy..

I carry that all over.

It holds my spot in da bed when I'm out on my never ending quests for FUN.

Sooo, one day she sent da BIGGEST FERRET I EVER SAW into my house so he could smell like me and I wouldn't be afraid... heck, even though he's a Bino like me? I FROZE... He's gigantic... but very gentle... his name is Shotgun.

He has friends he lives with and mommy sed if I can CURB YOUR TENDENCY to Swim in da CEMENT POND MissMissy..

then I can live with Sidey & Bowie & da Gentle Giant Shotgun.. but Sidey needs da BIG cement ponds to drink from..he can't use a btl. I'm trying..really I am... sounds of splashing,

& oh no... I gotted the floor wet... Again... hehehe.