

Love at first bite

Kylie Northover

May 5, 2008

IT DIDN'T attract the same level of interest as last month's 2020 Summit, but the weekend's inaugural Ferret Health Symposium, held by the Australian branch of the International Ferret Congress (no, I'm not making that up), had arguably more defined goals — *and* a raffle.

Ferrets, much maligned as bitey and smelly, are increasingly popular domestic pets in Australia. In the US, ferrets are the third most popular pet, despite being illegal in several states.

The two-day symposium, which attracted ferret lovers from around the country and veterinary specialists from as far afield as Canada and the US, featured presentations on the health requirements, care and behaviour of domestic "carpet sharks", as the furry creatures are affectionately known.

The Coolaroo Hotel in Melbourne's north had — presumably — never seen anything like it. Although attendees had to leave their own ferrets at home (the Coolaroo has a two-ferret limit), some brought toy ferrets, others wore caps declaring their love, or ferret-emblazoned T-shirts. For those who forgot, there were accessories for sale.

In the function room opposite the hotel's pokie den, a curious mix of old and young (and mostly female) ferret fans congregated.

I was initially surprised by the under-representation of the long-haired metalhead and homeless communities, until the gravity of the material presented by passionate veterinarians and academics was revealed; speakers addressed case studies, evolutionary history, ferret-specific diseases and statistics.

As one of the symposium's organisers, Western Australian Shirley Hewett, explained, the symposium was — ferret-shaped name-tags and novelty stubbie-holders aside — a serious affair.

"Our congress is about education," she said. "Unless ferrets are cared for correctly, they can have a whole suite of illnesses. A lot of vets treat them as they would cats or dogs. Ferrets are carnivores like cats and dogs, but they have their own particular illnesses."

Over the past 10 years, Ms Hewett said, the squirmy mammals had become popular, with Melbourne topping the nation for most ferret owners. Hewett herself has three ferrets, with Thumbtack (pictured) the star of the symposium.

And yet they still suffer from bad press, probably because of their origins as hunting animals. Ferrets were introduced to Australia in the 1880s to control the rabbit population, and were also used to hunt rodents.

"A lot of people assume that all ferrets do is stink and bite," Ms Hewett said. "In the early farming days, ferrets were kept caged, far away from humans, and they were only handled when they were used for hunting.

"If you get a ferret that's not handled, it's no different to a cat or a dog. It's going to be nervous and will want to latch on to protect itself. Biting is mainly a defensive thing."

They do have a distinctive scent, but once spayed, are not as bad as people assume. And, Ms Hewett emphasised, they are definitely not part of the rodent family. "People do tend to equate them with rats, but they're not rodents!"

The ferret is the only domesticated species from the family of animals classified *Mustelidae*, which includes badgers, sea otters, mink, weasels and polecats.

The ancestry of the ferret remains mysterious, though they are thought to have evolved from the European polecat.

A ferret-like animal was mentioned by Greek authors Aristophanes in 450BC and Aristotle in 350BC. According to various other ferret histories, it is believed the creatures were also used by Genghis Khan in Afghanistan in 1221.

In keeping with the times, ferrets have even made themselves useful in areas such as biomedical research (in studies of the human influenza virus) and as pint-sized transporters.

Ferrets were used to run cables for the Millennium Eve party in London's Greenwich Park.

One ferret, Freddie, was reportedly registered as an electrician's assistant with the New Zealand Electrical Workers Union (it made *Time* magazine).

Given that ferrets are believed to have been kept as companion animals even centuries ago, it is hard to believe they deserve their bad rap.

They really *are* cute (though I say this as someone who has not been bitten). And as pets, Ms Hewett said, they could be very rewarding. "They're very intelligent little critters; they're fun and playful.

They're really like a cross between a kitten, a puppy and a monkey," she said.

While they sleep up to 20 hours a day, when they're awake, "carpet sharks" tend to, well, ferret around.

"They are crepuscular, active mainly during dawn and dusk," Ms Hewett said. "They also get up a lot during the day or night and have short moments of activity."

Would-be owners are advised to keep two ferrets, as one requires a lot of attention. They also need a lot of "ferret-proofing".

"You do have to watch them — they'll get into any small space," Ms Hewett said. "But they know their names and will come if called."

Some ferrets can even be taught to fetch.

No wonder writer Virginia Woolf once described playwright Noel Coward as "as clever as a bag of ferrets".

For information about ferrets, go to www.ferretcongress.org.au

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2008/05/04/1209839453020.html>