Domestic Ferret

What do they look like?
Ferrets are a domesticated form of polecat, and have been selectively bred to be larger and heavier than their wild counterparts. They have a long, sinuous body with relatively short legs, and long curved claws for digging and climbing. Their characteristic hunched gait keeps their sensitive nose close to the ground. Males, known as hobs, average around 20 inches long from nose to tail, while females, called jills, are smaller, usually around 15 inches long. They come in four basic colors: albino, cream, sable, and silver, and may have different patterns and markings of white fur, including bibs, mitts, blazes and roans.

How do they behave?
Wild polecats are solitary and range over a large home territory, which they defend from other polecats. Their flexible bodies make them adept at fitting into tight spaces, including rabbit warrens. Domestic ferrets prefer to live in groups, as they are social and playful. Ferrets have been used by humans to hunt rabbits for centuries. More recently, some electricians have trained ferrets to carry wiring through tunnels. Ferrets are crepuscular, most active at dawn and dusk, and spend about sixteen hours a day sleeping!

What’s on the menu?
Ferrets are obligate carnivores, that is, they eat whole small prey, including the bones, organs, fur and feathers. They are efficient hunters of rodents, rabbits, small birds and snakes. At the Zoo, they eat ferret pellets, meat, and mice.

How are they born?
Ferrets are born hairless and blind, and dependent on their mother. She cares for her litter of 2-7 kits for around three months. The kits reach sexual maturity by six months of age.

Can I have one for a pet?
Ferrets are illegal to keep as pets in California. The local environment could provide all the necessities for ferrets to establish viable populations if released by irresponsible pet owners. If this were to happen, ferrets would become an invasive species, which mean that they would negatively affect the ecosystem by competing with native species for resources and habitats.

What should you know about them?
Although polecats are native to Europe and Asia, North America is home to one species of indigenous ferret, called the black-footed ferret. Driven to the brink of extinction through habitat loss and disease, the last known wild population of 18 individuals was taken into captivity in 1985. Through breeding efforts, these animals have been successfully reintroduced to areas of the Midwest in the United States. They have made a miraculous comeback but their survival still remains in the hands of humans. Breeding programs and habitat protection will determine their future.