

The Ferret – A Silent Stalker

By Rex Gogerty

When I was a lad growing up on an Iowa farm, we kept ferrets, not for pets but for hunting. Sending one of these weasel-size animals into a hole in the snow was a fun way to hunt cottontails. Back in the 1930's, it was also an inexpensive way to put meat on the table.

Ferrets are nose-y, agile little guys. Dad used to say a ferret has the sharpest teeth, the loosest hide, the quickest turns, and the most guts of any animal its size. He claimed a yearling could scare ground squirrels out of a bulls-nake hole or gophers out of their run. A well-trained ferret could flush more cottontails out of a woodpile in 20 min. than a beagle could in 2 hours.

Ferretting, which is now illegal for game animals, was a proven hunting practice long before my time. Farmers in parts of the Roman Empire used ferrets to supplement swords and stones. The European fitch-ferret was introduced into the U.S. in the 1870's. These natural-born hunters came into widespread use in prairies and woodlands teeming with tasty rabbits and crop-chewing varmints. My grandfather recalled raising ferrets on his farm in the 1880's to protect corn patches from gophers and ground squirrels.

Ferrets produce litters of 4 to 6 and range in color from albino to mixed brown and white or black and white. Dad said he didn't care

what color they were as long as they could hunt. He kept several in 6 by 8-ft. cages in the barn, with two or three per cage, depending on their size. A small "jill" is about 8 in. long and could make a U-turn in a kerosene lamp chimney. A "hob" was maybe twice that size and mean enough to rout a mink – its close cousin – from a creek bank. My brother, Pat, and I usually did the ferret chores. He was bit once when he forgot to wear heavy gloves. But most of the time ferrets were downright gentle, even playful, until you poked them into a hole. From then on, they're all business.

We fed our ferrets meat scraps, chicken guts, and even stillborn pigs. When they were 5 or 6 months old, we took ferrets out to learn the ups and downs of routing rabbits and rats. It was a natural instinct. I don't recall a ferret ever refusing to hunt. Dad was a caring, clever trainer. He would usually send 2 hob ferrets to flush game like gophers, gray squirrels, or woodchucks.

Hunting with ferrets during the winter was a great spectator sport, especially for a kid. They're inquisitive explorers, especially when they're poking and sniffing down a rabbit's snow hole. The cornered cottontail quickly plowed a new path in the snow alongside the snooping intruder. When he saw the light at the end of the tunnel, we could hear the rabbit thumping and clawing its way to the entrance. Pat and I were waiting



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with clubs or burlap bags. Sometimes we would catch them by hand, but Dad had his shotgun in case we fumbled. When the ferret flushed several rabbits from the den, we'd grab one, whack him in the neck, and get ready for the next one. We tried to hold down bruising since Mom was particular about the ingredients for rabbit stew or fried rabbit and gravy.

A ferret's homing instinct was usually enough to bring him out of the hole. Occasionally there were anxious delays when we weren't certain what our hunter had encountered in a dark den. Sometimes a ferret would kill his prey and lie down for a nap. Dad brought along a spade and sometimes he'd whistle them out but he never resorted to using a leash. "Could make me and the ferret look stupid," he said.

When a jill emerged from the hole, she'd curl up in Dad's well-lined jacket pocket.

He usually carried larger hobs in a 1-ft. sq. cage. During the offseason, we kept the ferrets in shape by picking them after barn rats, mice, and ground squirrels. A couple of ferrets turned loose under a post pile or corn crib made for good target practice. My cousin Spud Horton, who grew up in eastern Colorado, said they used ferrets to control prairie dogs.

Recently, there has been talk of legalizing ferretting with a daily bag limit during a short winter season. The way it is now, coyotes, foxes, hawks, and other predators harvest rabbits on a no-limit basis. Let's consider reviving the exciting sport of my boyhood when we could set the table without firing a shot.

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Small Farm Helps Minnesota Woman Save Zambian Orphans

By Dee Goerge, Contributing Editor

Carol McBrady never imagined farming would be a big part of her life when she became a social worker nearly 30 years ago. But then she had no idea she'd end up moving 8,500 miles away from her Minnesota home to Lusaka, Zambia, where street orphans call her "Mama Carol".

It started when McBrady went on a mission trip to Africa in 2002 and saw streets full of orphaned kids. She went home, sold her house, and took all the money she had in the world back to Zambia to start an organization called "Action for Children – Zambia". She rented a home in the city – now called Salvation Home – to take in as many as 42 children at a time but finding funds to support them all was her biggest problem.

When a donor gave the organization 50 acres of land in a village about an hour away, she knew it could be very important to her children's futures.

McBrady and the children have been teaching themselves to farm, growing vegetables for the home and also to sell at local markets. Three years ago the land was brush covered and hard clay ground. Living in a tent and thatched shacks and with just hoes and axes, 12 boys and a few village elders dug up 12 acres. In 2009, McBrady and the children at Salvation Home enjoyed the first food from the land: pumpkins, tomatoes, leafy vegetables, cabbage, carrots, onions and corn. The boys who farmed the land carried baskets of food three miles to catch a bus and paid luggage fees to bring the vegetables to the city.

This year, thanks to a generous donor, the boys had a small concrete house to live in and a used pickup to transport the food that was harvested. It takes 330 lbs. of corn and corn meal a week to feed 42 children.

"It has been wonderful," McBrady says. "Every Sunday, we'd go out to the farm and pick vegetables to take back."

The 12 boys, all 18 and older, are part of a formal cooperative McBrady set up.

They sell extra produce and are paid based on shares. Much of the produce goes to a hotel, where some of McBrady's "graduates" work as chefs. Overall harvest has been good. But spring floods destroyed the tomatoes this year, and there wasn't any sweet corn seed to plant. Both had been high value market items in 2009.

"Things like that happen to every farmer," McBrady notes. "But what an experience it's been for these guys, to grow a product and have a profit. They were boys that came through treatment, the worst behaved boys, who probably couldn't have worked anywhere else. On the farm they're becoming real men. They have to take care of themselves."

When McBrady rescues children from the streets they are generally abused, addicted and about one-third of them have HIV/AIDS — the disease that is the reason so many children are orphans. She says animals in the U.S. are treated better than orphans in Africa. After caring for their health needs and treating them for addictions, McBrady tries to find relatives and also assists them in getting an education. Children with no other option live with her and go to school. When they graduate, she networks with Zambian businesses to find them jobs, mostly in the hospitality industry. Some go on to higher education.

For those who prefer to be their own boss, the farm is the perfect place.

Two of the oldest boys (26 and 21) studied agriculture for 18 months and manage the farm. After last year's harvest they doubled the size of their plot and planted peanuts on half the land as part of a conservation method to improve yields. The stalks and residue will be mixed in the soil of shallow basins to add nutrients and hold water for next year's crops. Villagers who helped the boys get started are now learning from them. About half the boys have moved on, taking their earnings to start their own farms in other villages.

McBrady is working with an Irish organization to build permanent homes at



Young men and women rescued from the streets of Zambia manage a 50-acre farm for Carol McBrady's organization. Basic equipment, seeds and other resources are needed.

located out at the farm.

"Children without any living relatives could move there. We call it Kulanga Bana Farm, which means 'Keeping our Children,'" McBrady says.

She admits her life has not been easy since she sold her Minnesota home in 2005 to move to Lusaka. But McBrady says she's discovered her life's purpose. With simple faith and volunteer supporters back home raising funds – and with the help of social workers and volunteers in Lusaka – she has rehabilitated more than 150 children as well as helped hundreds of other children still on the street. McBrady receives no salary, has occasional volunteers who help at the home and a part-time cook, so the majority of donated funds go directly to caring for children.

Acquiring livestock is the next step, McBrady says. The young farmers want to raise poultry, pigs and goats, which would feed the children as well as bring in income. She estimates it would cost about \$10,000 to purchase animals, build shelters, buy equipment, and so on.

Donations of equipment and money are

welcomed. The farm could be expanded much more quickly with a rototiller, and hoses and irrigation systems would be helpful to distribute water from the well, which is manually pumped. Fertilizer, seeds (especially sweet corn), and even durable blue jeans all make a big difference, McBrady says.

"It is so important that we can continue to grow this farm so the kids — especially our oldest boys — never have to go back to the streets," McBrady says. "It is so crucial to make us self-sustaining."

Individuals, organizations and businesses interested in donating cash or equipment for the farm or Salvation Home can contact the Minnesota offices for more information. You can also learn more about McBrady and her children at her organization's website.

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