



Ferrets: Fuzzy friends or ferocious ferals? Photo: NSW Ferret Welfare Society/www.ferret.org.au

Parks on alert for furry ferals

By Jacqui Knox

To some, ferrets are a fuzzy ball of friendship. To others, they are cantankerous carnivores even the Bible called unclean.

Either way ferrets have been identified as a threat to wildlife in a draft pest management strategy for the Blue Mountains along with cats, foxes, and all the other usual suspects.

The flyweight carnivores have been seen in the Lower Mountains by Department of Environment and Conservation staff — although nobody knows if they escaped or were dumped.

"I think for the moment we have a total of four sightings, three of which are in the Grose Valley," said National Parks and Wildlife Service regional manager Geoff Luscombe.

"They're on our radar and we are going to keep an eye on it, but they're a low priority."

Ferrets were originally kept as hunting animals, as their elongated bodies make them adept at wriggling into confined spaces such as rabbit holes.

In New Zealand a feral hybrid of ferrets and polecats has been blamed for killing native birdlife, while in Queensland the

creatures have been outlawed as pets.

However according to Geoff Luscombe the Blue Mountains appears to be missing the environmental conditions needed for ferrets to prosper.

"Ferrets have established themselves in some parts of Victoria and (are) a bit more widespread in New Zealand," he said.

"If they do show signs of establishing themselves somewhere we are ready to go."

Ross Woodward from the NSW Ferret Welfare Society is also sceptical about this possibility of a feral colony.

"They'll probably starve to

death . . . and they don't like hot weather.

"Most (escaped) ferrets are found by following people into their homes," he said.

Other unusual inclusions in the 94-page pest management strategy include a solitary red-eared slider turtle (an invasive species with a nasty bite) living in Glenbrook Lagoon.

However the more serious threats to conservation values in the million hectare world heritage area, and to surrounding landowners, are not so curious.

They include wild dogs, pigs, and foxes as well as a list of 16 priority weeds including blackberry, gorse and broom.

Ferret facts:

- Scientific name: *Mustela putorius furo*.
- Weight: 800-1500g.
- Diet: Ferrets are carnivorous and are often fed cat food.
- Activity: Ferrets are inquisitive and playful when awake but will sleep up to 18 hours a day. They live for six to 10 years.
- The NSW Ferret Welfare Society recommends keeping ferrets in a secure cage when not supervised.
- Pet ferrets should be desexed — it is healthier for females and gets rid of 90 per cent of their musky smell.
- The NSW Ferret Welfare Society offers advice to ferret owners and organises social occasions including some in the Blue Mountains. Go to www.ferret.org.au.