

THE FERRET.

WHETHER the ferret and polecat belong to different species, has been a subject of doubt with some naturalists †. The resemblance of colour, in some ferrets, to that of the polecat, may have given rise to this doubt. The polecat, however, is a native of temperate climates, and is a wild animal, like the martin. But the ferret is a native of warm countries, and cannot subsist, even in France, unless in a domestic state. The ferret alone is used in hunting rabbits, because he is more easily tamed than the polecat. Both, indeed, have a strong and disagreeable odour. But the most convincing proof of their being different animals, is, that they have no intercourse with one another, and differ in a num-

* This animal has a very sharp nose, red fiery eyes, and round ears; the colour of the whole body is a very pale yellow; its length is about 14 inches, and that of the tail 5; Pennant's *Synops. of Quad.* p. 214.

In Latin, *Viverra*, *Furo*, *Furonculus*; in Spanish, *Haran*, *Faran*; in German, *Frett*, *Frettel*, *Farette*; in Polish, *Łasza*; in French, *Le Ferret*.

Viverra, *Furo*, *Idia*; *Gesner. Hist. Quad.* p. 762. *Icn. Quad.* p. 101.

Muscula pilis subulavis longioribus, castaneo colore terminatis, vestita; viverra, max. Muscula pilis ex albo subulavis vestita; viverra sumina; Brisson. Regn. Anim. p. 177.

Muscula Furo, pedibus filis, oculis rubicundis; Linn. Syst. p. 68.

† *Linn. Syst. Nat.*

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ber of essential characters. The body of the ferret is thinner and more lengthened, his head narrower, and his muzzle sharper, than those of the polecat. He is not endowed with the same instinct in finding subsistence, but, at least in our climates, must be carefully nourished within doors, and cannot exist in the fields; for those which are lost in the burrows of rabbits never multiply, but probably perish during the winter. The ferret also, like other domestic animals, varies in colour; and is equally common in warm regions *, as the polecat is rare.

The female ferret is less than the male: When in season, she is so extremely ardent, that, we are assured, she dies, if her desires are not gratified †. Ferrets are brought up in casks or boxes, where they are furnished with beds of hemp or flax. They sleep almost continually. Whenever they awake, they search eagerly for food, which consists of bran, bread, milk, &c. They produce twice every year: The female goes six weeks with young: Some of them devour their young as soon as they are brought forth, instantly come again in season, and have three litters, which generally consist of five or six, and sometimes seven or eight, and even nine.

This animal is by nature a mortal enemy to the rabbit. Whenever a dead rabbit is, for the first time, presented to a young ferret, he flies

* The ferret is found in Barbary, and is called *Ningé*. See Shan's Travels.

† *Gesner. Hist. Quad.* p. 763.

upon

upon it, and bites it with fury; but if it be alive, he seizes it by the throat or the nose, and sucks its blood. When let into the burrows of rabbits, he is muzzled, that he may not kill them in their holes, but only oblige them to come out, in order to be caught in the nets. If the ferret is let in without a muzzle, he is in danger of being lost; for, after sucking the blood of the rabbit, he falls asleep; and even smoking the hole is not a certain method of recalling him; because the holes have often several entries which communicate with each other, and the ferret retires into one of these, when incommoded with the smoke. Boys likewise use the ferret for catching birds in the holes of walls or of old trees.

According to Strabo, the ferret was brought from Africa into Spain; which is by no means improbable, as Spain is the native climate of rabbits, and the country where formerly these animals most abounded. It may, therefore, be presumed, that, in order to diminish their number, which perhaps was inconvenient, ferrets were imported for the purpose of hunting rabbits in a profitable manner, instead of multiplying martins, which would have destroyed the rabbits without bringing any advantage to the hunters.

The ferret, though easily tamed and rendered docile, is extremely irascible. His odour is always disagreeable; but, when irritated, it becomes much more offensive. His eyes are lively,

lively, and his aspect is inflammatory; all his movements are nimble, and he is, at the same time, so vigorous, that he can easily overcome a rabbit, though at least four times larger than himself.

Notwithstanding the authority of commentators, it is still uncertain whether the ferret be the *ictis* of the Greeks. 'The *ictis*,' says Aristotle, 'is a species of wild weasel, smaller than the little Maltese dog, but resembling the weasel in its hair, in the whiteness of the under part of the body, and likewise in the craftiness of its manners. It admits of being tamed; and makes great havock among the bee-hives, being extremely fond of honey. It also attacks birds, and, like the cat, has an osseous penis *.'

1. There appears to be a contradiction in saying that the *ictis* is a species of wild weasel, which admits of being tamed; for the common weasel, which, in this country, is the most savage of the two, is perfectly irreclaimable. 2. The ferret, though larger than the weasel, can never be compared for size to the lap-dog. 3. The ferret appears not to have the cunning of the weasel, nor indeed any craftiness at all: Lastly, he never attacks the bee-hives, nor is he fond of honey. I enquired of M. le Roi, inspector of the royal chases, concerning this last fact. His answer follows: 'M. de Buffon may be assured, that the ferrets have no predilection for honey;

* Hist. Anim. lib. ix. cap. 6.

but, when hungry, may be made to eat it.
 I have fed them several days with bread soaked in water mixed with honey. The two last days, they eat it in pretty large quantities; but the weakest of them began to be sensibly emaciated. This is not the first time that M. le Roi has obliged me with important facts. Having no ferrets, I tried the same experiment on the ermine, by giving him only pure honey to eat, and a little milk for drink: But he died in a few days. Thus neither the ermine nor the ferret are fond of honey, like the *ictis* of the ancients; which inclines me to think, that the word *ictis* is perhaps only a generic name; or, if it marks any particular species, it ought rather to be applied to the martin or polecat, both of which possess the craftiness of the weasel, attack the bee-hives, and are extremely fond of honey.

Plate LXXVIII.



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