'Animal,' Episode 4: Ferrets

0:01

hey it's Michael today we have something really special for you a blissful break

0:06

from the news it's a new series from nyt audio called animal my colleague Sam

0:14

Anderson from the Times magazine traveled the world to have encounters with animals not to claim them or to

0:21

tame them but just to appreciate them each episode is a journey to get closer

0:28

to a creature that Sam loves for the next 6 weeks we'll be running this limited series every Sunday here on the

0:35

daily feed but if you want to hear all the episodes right now you can search for it wherever you get your podcasts

0:43

today episode 4 hope you like

0:53

it where are we is this actually where yeah I think

1:00

here this looks pretty sketchy turn right into the parking lot then arrive at your

1:05

destination what what do you see that license plate the license plate says

1:11

feret what what what what are you pointing at you oh my God that license plate says I love my fets

1:19

ah it's happening my people okay let's go check in I'm going

1:26

to be honest with you I'm a middle-aged man my life is dull and soft I'm

1:33

basically a human butter knife but there's one thing that instantly fills

1:38

me with joy giddy squeaky childlike joy we found my people they're loading up a

1:44

cart full of like feret products from The New York Times I'm Sam Anderson this

1:50

is animal episode 4 [Applause]

1:58

ferrets transported up here today how many ferrets were in that van I saw oh we're not done yet I've got it's August

2:06

and I've just arrived with my colleague Crystal Dam in Columbus Ohio which at

2:12

this moment happens to be the most farity place in America people come from

2:18

all around I came from Minnesota because feret enthusiasts from all over the country are pouring in for one of the

2:25

major stops on the national fet circuit a competition called the feret Buckeye

2:32

bash basically Imagine The Prestige of the Westminster dog show but instead of

2:37

beagles and Pomeranians it's just hundreds of ferrets I'm sorry this is a

2:43

rolling Tower of ferrets as we're standing in the lobby of the official competition Hotel a woman walks in

2:51

rolling a luggage cart stacked with cages there four in here two in here

2:57

three in there there's Brown ferret albino fets ferrets lounging around in

3:03

miniature hammocks and snuggled up in comfy little beds this is Phineas

3:08

weaselton he's really long did you say Phineas weaselton yeah and before I know

3:14

it you should see what I've got in my car I want to see what you guys are I'm helping her and her feret friends

3:22

unload a fet for anyone who doesn't know is basically a

3:27

weasel it's long and tubular sort of like a badger crossed with a snake but

3:33

also crossed with a teddy bear what am I seeing in the cage that these faits are eating we raw meat well this is Salon

3:41

chewies over here but some of the cages we're unloading are littered with bones and carcasses of like whole dead birds

3:49

why is the spirit bald they have adrenal disease which is common especially and Marshall this might be the place to

3:55

mention that ferrets can be pretty polarizing pets people who love them

4:01

like me really love them and people who don't love them which is probably most

4:06

of humanity really do not love them wait what happens if I put my fingers in that

4:11

bottom cage he will probably fight you yeah to the Bone to the Bone what the

4:17

word fet comes from the Latin for little thief they were domesticated basically

4:23

yesterday historically speaking around 2500 years ago just for reference dogs

4:29

were domesticated more like 20,000 years ago INF ferrets were mainly used to hunt

4:35

rodents and rabbits they have sharp claws and oily fur and glands that make

4:41

them smell weird and also extremely strong Jaws which they are not at all

4:48

afraid to use in fact this is part of why ferrets are actually illegal to keep as pets in

4:55

a couple of States but in spite of all that I have loved ferrets my whole

5:04

life as a kid growing up in Oregon I desperately wanted one they were at all

5:09

the pet stores I went to and I'd go running past the Geral and hamsters and parakeets and just stand there with the

5:17

ferrets communing for as long as I could letting them bite my fingers through the

5:23

cage but I was never allowed to take one home and here's the thing unfulfill

5:29

childhood dreams they don't just die feel like I might go home this weekend with some

5:35

ferrets they follow you around and scratch at you and burrow a hole deep

5:41

into your heart see you guys around yeah you guys checking in yeah which is

5:49

why I've come all the way here to the official Hotel of the feret Buckeye bash

5:55

cool you guys thank you so where we because this hotel is filling up fast

6:01

with chaotic ferrets and feret people all the way down here H one of whom has

6:06

agreed to help fulfill my childhood Dream by initiating me into the Fret

6:15

lifestyle hello please come in guy hi this is a this is Millie mild

6:24

hi look at this lady but the first fret we meet is actually a large dog I'm

6:29

sorry yeah I just adopted her on Tuesday so we're still kind of getting to know each other yeah hey I'm Sam hi I'm Aon

6:38

man just drove here from upstate New York many hours in her tiny car with not

6:45

only Milly her newly adopted dog but also her friend Karen and of course her

6:51

fets whose cages are now wedged around the room there's one by the microwave

6:56

one by the coffee maker well should we should we meet some buddies yeah you can

7:01

um this is Aaron's first time competing in the Buckeye bash yes this is Genesis

7:07

Genesis Genesis looks exactly like the Fret of my childhood dreams but she's

7:12

gorgeous right yeah um here actually you want to hold

7:21

her hey sweetie sweet she's so

7:27

slithery you know that classic thing they do in movies when they want to show something is beautiful the shaft of

7:35

heavenly light pouring down Angel choir singing well a majestic Heavenly light

7:42

is not worthy of Genesis if you really wanted to signify the spectacular otherworldly beauty of

7:50

Genesis you'd have to make a shaft of little Genesis is pouring down from the

7:56

sky Genesis is really checking me out really being stared at she's probably my

8:03

favorite she don't tell any others Genesis is also the key to Aaron's feret

8:08

future because Aaron wants to breed ferrets so if I could have like just a

8:14

whole line of ferrets that have her temperament and her structure I'd be

8:19

very happy with that um she has such a sweet face oh no so is

8:28

she your big h hope for the competition Genesis mhm um for him he's just going to show

8:36

because he's going to show this is when we turn our attention to the other competitor in the room so this is

8:42

Gooseberry um he is yeah Gooseberry the yin to genesis's Yang in March yeah Mr

8:49

Goose this Barret is light brown and weirdly small but he's still in juvenile

8:57

so and where Genesis is call calm and thoughtful and seems to be reciting

9:02

poetry in her mind Gooseberry is an absolute freak trying he's trying his

9:08

darnest to get out he won't stop moving thrashing around in circles biting the

9:13

bars of his cage what are you doing crazy what are you doing with your claws

9:18

Gooseberry is of Hungarian descent and at 6 months old he's technically an

9:24

adolescent hob or in human terms a teenage male ow oh you got me

9:32

good you are a nut did he try to take a bite out of the

9:39

mic he grabb he grabbed the mic with his paw mine what kind of animal acts like this

9:46

a [Music] feret as Gooseberry works on destroying

9:53

his cage there's a knock on the door this is just chaos everywhere

10:01

sorry we'll be quick I know you got hi no problem P still C your baby's

10:06

paperwork it's a feret delivery I had no idea you could get a feret delivered like a

10:14

pizza okay so this is the first time I'm meeting this guy oh my

10:20

gosh hey buddy oh you have a pretty head yes you do oh he is a beauty he is a

10:28

beauty right yeah yeah oh yeah oh gentle very nice very sweet boy he's biting you

10:36

sweetly yeah why are you into ferrets when did you first encounter a feret

10:44

um okay so I grew up in California and they're not legal there so I didn't

10:50

actually come into contact with a faret until I was an adult and moved out of

10:56

California I didn't hold one until 2019 and the first one I held was Mr Groot

11:02

Groot and I had to I had to have him as soon as I held him I just kind of knew

11:08

that's what I wanted that's I don't know how else to explain it I guess cuz some people say that there's like a dog

11:15

shaped hole in their heart or a cat-shaped hole so I guess it would be like a feret shaped

11:21

hole and a ferret would get right into that hole exactly absolutely I also have

11:27

a ferret shaped hole in my heart that's kind of my childhood was kind of chaotic there was a divorce and a bunch of

11:34

stepparents and we always seem to be moving including a big move from Oregon

11:40

to California where ferrets are illegal and so every summer when I'd go

11:47

back up to Oregon to live with my dad I would see the ferrets in the pet stores and I would beg him to get me one and he

11:55

would say no and in my little tiny child mind

12:02

everything would have been fine if I could have just had a pet

12:09

fret I think they're grounding for

12:15

me grounding which is ironic because they're very crazy right they're kind of

12:22

off the wall but it's like you have you really have to be there with them

12:29

in the moment yeah you have to be in the moment yeah they're very in the present moment

12:36

um I do have a hard time being in the moment myself like I I'm usually thinking about

12:43

either the past or the future and I miss the moment um but not with them you have to

12:50

be in the moment with them they demand it

12:56

um so is being silly isn't it he turned himself upside down and bit the bar just

13:03

like hanging upside down from it a feret is a paradox it's so chaotic

13:10

that it wraps all the way around into zen absolute chaos forces absolute

13:17

presence and so tomorrow when I am immersed in hundreds of squiggly Wiggly

13:24

ferrets at this show I'm going to be so freaking present I'm might be fully in

13:29

the moment for the first time in my whole life all right we should let everyone get to bed thank you so much

13:36

for letting us hang in the hotel room and who knows what could happen

13:41

then might have to figure out how to get 8 fet sleeping hammocks onto the airplane home and and a bunch of dead

13:49

birds for them to snack on

14:02

amaz brings her coffee your breakfast sandwich too oh

14:08

thank you Aaron how do you not have a fet vanity license plate I know I I

14:13

really if I get a um SUV or a wagon I want to call it the woozle wagon and

14:19

like have that on the back of it as a decal and then like woole one as the

14:25

license plate maybe the next morning we meet Aaron in a parking lot at the Ohio State fairgrounds yeah oh I just noticed

14:32

your earrings those are great Aaron is all decked out in feret gear earrings

14:39

t-shirt purple feret boots hey Genesis today's your big day to the day where

14:45

you win Genesis is looking glorious yeah she looks even prettier this morning than

14:51

she did last you can see her in the full light yeah really look how clean and

14:56

perfect she is gooseberry you is also there I can't even talk to you he loves

15:03

you look at him he's not even biting I know he's very calm this morning he's in

15:08

uh game shape yeah oh no there he goes oh yeah that's going to happen there he goes all right let's get him checked in

15:15

we are a real parade of animals heading toward the hall Aaron carries Gooseberry

15:21

I carry Genesis and aon's friend Karen is walking Millie the doged how are you

15:27

good are we going in that way that way but it turns out we're actually too many

15:33

animals you know no animals are allowed in here dogs are allowed in no dogs are allowed in oh that's pretty obvious you

15:41

can't have a dog in The Spar show Hall sorry what are you going to do with him then the woman in charge of the feret

15:47

show Scarlet is saying that Millie has to go that will set all the fs off okay we

15:56

don't want them biting the J and as we're standing there clutching our animals go ahead you can go you go ahead

16:02

the line behind us starts to back up do you know how many fots in there don't even know what a dog is and you know how

16:08

good their smelling is and I am finding this extremely stressful so it it it

16:13

sets them off you need me to do it I'll do it this is your gig this is what you

16:19

do so that's when Aaron's friend Karen very stoically announces that she is

16:25

going to walk Millie back to the hotel N9 miles a long halfway across Columbus

16:33

Ohio with this dog she just met and she takes the leash and just

16:39

heads off okay where are we where did you say we were Jamie's like I'm over

16:46

somewhere so with the dog gone and feeling slightly Shell Shocked we are

16:52

finally allowed to enter the Hall where we meet up with some of Aaron's feret friends this is Roy Hello nice to meet

16:59

you guys did you do you feel bad at all about getting yelled at by Scarlet on

17:06

your way in the door no because I have no idea what's going

17:11

on everybody will get yelled at by Scarlet everybody yeah it's like a it's just a thing just wait your turn so

17:18

she's famous for this yeah oh she's really nice she's just very aggressive

17:23

interesting yeah you just kind of have to take it and like keep going

17:29

that's kind of perfect cuz like fet owners are the people who could do that the best right yeah they actually all

17:35

take it very well yeah y i just nod and smile cuz like I really don't know what

17:40

the hell is going on so yeah you seem I have to say you seem

17:45

comfortable existing like in a level of sort of chaos I do yeah oh you seem

17:53

chill and stuff's going on all around you don't quite know what's going on and probably because I took my anxiety Med

17:59

today so that's good know um I take Lexa Pro so it's like yeah yes I had to get

18:05

mine increased recently actually um so I'm I'm good now I'm good how many milligrams are we talking a 20 milligram

18:13

okay I'm on 10 good good times yeah you do seem very chill though like getting

18:19

yelled at about your dog you're fine it is what it is she's yelling at us about the line nobody's going ahead of us it's

18:26

fine I think that as I get older I just care less so that that has something to do with it there is that about getting

18:33

older that I like I felt that in my 30s for sure I just kind of okay now I'm in

18:39

my 40s and I'm like hardly even present on this Earth I'm just like a floating

18:45

Consciousness unaffected by everything around

18:51

me uh so okay what's the plan now I don't know um I don't I think they start

18:56

judging at 10: so oh really I think so probably oh a

19:02

schedule okay there are so many freret categories just blizzards of categories

19:08

and subcategories but there's really only one that matters to us the big one that

19:15

Genesis will compete in breeder breeder that's her 3 to six 3 to

19:20

six it's going to be a long day I know which means I have approximately 7 hours

19:26

to marinate in Fair fets and try out the whole feret lifestyle so we're just

19:34

walking around kind of getting the scene and interviewing hey how's it going good you hey how you doing and as I start

19:40

talking to freret owners was it like about a fret that kind of there's something that like appeal to you what

19:45

becomes clear is that feel like oh these are kind of my people freret people are

19:50

their own special breed it's always good to get together with a group of fet people and everybody is so kind anyone

19:56

can own a cat or a dog has fets on her shoes she's got so many ferret pins on

20:01

her hat but feret owners take things to a whole different level I've had feret

20:06

since 97 86 that was my first fet in 1982 and then after that I got more of

20:12

course cuz there's fet math as you can ask any of these guys you start out with one you end up with many I came home

20:19

with 27 parrots when I was only going to come home with three how many 20 that's low for me they're really

20:28

cute they're fun to play he just came up to me and he was just loving and just really cute I started playing with musky

20:34

for 10 minutes and I absolutely fell in love the love fret people have for their ferrets I love my little golden nuggets

20:41

it is a special love that can lead to some pretty wild situations I set up a

20:46

baby pool like filling a pool with Cool Whip and the next thing you know we at

20:52

the feret go in this cool whip of course some of them just lit but

20:59

after a while you seen them coming up through the Cool Whip and down through the Cool Whip and it was it was

21:07

chaos it was absolute [Music]

21:18

chaos so are you all judges um yeah we're um board members past presidents

21:27

she's current Treasurer and I'm in charge of at one end of the hall up on a stage sit two officiall looking women

21:34

Sally Heber and Vicky McKim and today you're judging yeah we're judging they've been working together in the fet

21:41

world since the 1990s and their official duties have taken them all over the place Japan

21:48

Australia Germany flights paid hotel's paid we helped um the folks in Japan set

21:55

up their organiz organization Sally and Vicky helped establish the American fet

22:00

association's official judging criteria we wrote the standard in a perspective

22:07

of what did nature mean it to be and it gets pretty detailed so what we're looking for is they're looking at every

22:14

little bit from snout to tail structure of the ferret so we're actually feeling all the bones and then we go into the

22:20

muscle mass this is very important hundreds of ferrets will pass through the expert hands of Sally and Vicky

22:27

today including Aaron's ferrets Genesis and Gooseberry what's the rules on biting

22:36

DQ can do disqualified if they puncture draw blood

22:42

they're out of here um for all three judges regardless if the other judges have seen them or not this is a long day

22:50

for you long long focused days an exhausting the pool at the hotel closes at 9: I want to be back there to get

22:57

back in a one is calling me

23:03

yes all right well have

23:08

fun judges to the

23:14

stage we do this as a blind showing if you've never been here before so therefore the judges do not know who is

23:21

bringing their pars up to be seen and then Genesis is up

23:30

I have no idea yeah cuz they're running behind so I don't even know anymore um I

23:36

am a little concerned because I have an appointment to get to at 7:30 today so I

23:41

don't know what I'm going to do at what time 7:30 yeah and goose in the middle of all this got to go get a car Aaron

23:49

tells me that she has decided to buy a car today I I acquired another feret

23:54

while I was here so uh um and then I was thinking to myself s where is it going

24:00

to go I hadn't thought that far to be honest with you and that's a little embarrassing uh but I figured it out and

24:08

you had not planned this when you left New York no it was I mean it was in the

24:13

it was on the back of my mind my car is almost old enough to vote and has a

24:19

giant rust hole in the side and I still cannot bring myself to buy a new

24:26

one what kind of car are you getting it's a hondai Santa Fe Sport

24:31

2013 this has already been by far the most F day of my life and yet as the

24:38

hours crawl by one go it keeps getting exponentially more

24:47

faity we watch a tube race it's going backwards and then an Elvis contest oh

24:54

they're weighing to see you as the fattest fet look at too look at that big

25:01

and then we peruse the infinite merch tables you going to buy any merch you

25:06

see anything so many t-shirts to choose from I'm definitely going to buy a shirt I think I'm going to buy the introverted

25:13

but willing to discuss ferrets can't go wrong there's a black shirt that says

25:18

feret hair don't care it's covered with little white line so it looks like

25:23

actual feret hair that's a pretty good one too there's another shirt that says unless you're a feret please get away

25:30

from me that's the when you should get revenge of the

25:35

feret by late afternoon all right listen up we looking for breeder

25:40

CS really we're still things are so far behind schedule that the schedule might as well not have

25:47

existed and I've reached a point I didn't think was possible I feel like I'm going fret

25:56

blind like I can't see ferrets anymore I've seen so many ferrets that's a lot a

26:03

lot I've maybe had my fill of ferrets but that doesn't stop Aaron from trying

26:08

to sell me one of her future feret babies so you're ready now maybe maybe

26:16

maybe maybe next season yeah I'm scared to get a fet why maybe I'm not up to it all the

26:24

energy it takes and all the like get like you know anxious and like

26:30

overwhelmed and like depressed and then what if and then this fet needs me and then okay so I get anxious and

26:36

overwhelmed and depressed too and they help remember we we take the same pills yeah just different dosage um and the

26:45

way that you handle and you look at Genesis I think you'd be a good parro dad if you wanted yeah but now if you

26:52

get one you know you got to get three three is the magic number I thought two was kind of the magic number no because

26:57

two is harder because then they'll bond together maybe and then if one of them dies the other one gets really sad and

27:03

it dies shortly thereafter so if you have three it's just a better life huh

27:09

yeah I would say three a three is like having one but better looks like we're ready for the

27:15

breeder jills it's time is it time jills finally it's time for Genesis to be

27:23

crowned the greatest fet ever to live on planet Earth

27:28

we head to the stage where Sally and Vicky are working their way down the line number uh

27:36

613 hey Kitty and then they get to Genesis here goes our

27:44

girl out she's a little squirmy she got a giggle I don't know if

27:50

that's good or bad easy easy easy don't get all excited it's all fine and good okay

28:00

there's like a moraca portion of the judging and a rubber duck portion boy

28:06

don't give them squeakies like she responded well to the

28:14

duck that's like Silk I know our fur is

28:20

gorgeous as we wait for the scores to be tallied for the finalists to be called

28:25

up it's like Aaron is over there getting all packed up I see Aaron leaving the hall yeah there she goes she's coming

28:33

back after she gets her new car is the plan this means I am in charge now all

28:40

right we are ready for call backs for Greer 501 503 506 507 55011

28:50

[Music]

29:04

501 503 506 507 I'm standing clenching my sweaty fists as the announcer calls

29:11

back all the ferrets that have placed in genesis's category 61 genesis's number

29:17

is 613 609 611 and

29:22

612 but they never call it Genesis wins nothing

29:30

yeah I feel too blasted to talk to [Music] anybody and I actually feel crushed I

29:38

got all swept up in the rush of competition and now my nervous system feels like a dirty old rung out

29:47

sponge by this point we've been here almost 12 hours things are running so

29:53

late that the guy who rented out the hall is standing in the doorway looking Furious with his keys in his

30:03

hand the vendors and breeders are all scrambling packing their merch and breaking down

30:10

tables one of the winning fets gets her foot stuck in the trophy she didn't like

30:15

that room and the whole thing is ending in a crescendo of ferret chaos all right

30:21

we got to lose fet did somebody yes but someone needs to identify it and

30:30

somehow there is still one last category left to judge it's called passport for

30:37

ferrets with foreign ancestry where's which means Gooseberry our Hungarian

30:44

feret will be the last chance to win anything Goose but Aaron is still gone

30:50

it's just me and goose and I really want the two of us to get a win so I open his

30:57

carrier I look at him and he looks at me bu then

31:03

he pops right out and Nestles into my hands like he belongs there like he's been custom shaped to fit my

31:12

grip good he's pretty chill he's interested in my beard he's definitely going to shoot out

31:19

of my hands in a second here ow okay bit my

31:25

arm Vicky beckons us up to her table table she twists and turns Gooseberry in

31:32

her hands she looks in his mouth and his ears and he doesn't bite her or claw her

31:38

for once he's actually a good boy and then very matter of factly she hands him

31:44

back to me like he's my fet he's an attic we've always meant to do something

31:49

that it's pretty big and what if he was be a really good place for a fet for two

31:55

or three fets they could really run around

32:00

and have their own space they wouldn't smell up the rest of the

32:06

house in eighth place it's 905 Vicky starts calling out the winners

32:12

countdown style 405 sixth place is 9004 fifth place is

32:21

101 it's happening fourth place is 901 holy crap that's

32:29

third place is 909 that's you little fig can I see 108

32:35

and 109 Sam has to show Gooseberry again to

32:41

break a tie to Second Place goes to

32:48

109 and first place there you go second place in the

32:54

final competition of the Buckeye Bash Gooseberry the world's most fery feret

33:03

has won second place okay okay okay okay bud I got to I got to get the

33:10

picture I pick up my triumphant green ribbon would you get second awesome and

33:16

Gooseberry and I get our official Buckeye bash photo congratulations

33:23

guys all right thank you cool congratulations thank you

33:30

we did it buddy I told you we'd do it I told you coming into today you were a star and a

33:37

champion is Aaron coming back just then Aaron text us a photo of

33:44

her new car a brown Hyundai with a giant yellow bow on it it's big enough to fit

33:50

her dog her friend Karen and all of her fets at least for now this guy got

33:56

second place and we text her back a photo of me with my ribbon holding Goose looking almost

34:03

terrifyingly Happy have a great evening hi you she says she'll be wrapped up

34:08

with paperwork for a while and asks if I will take the ferrets back to the

34:14

hotel hey which of course I'd love nothing more second place yeah we did

34:21

holy crap look at you my god when we meet Aaron I tell her everything so

34:27

that's all your ribbons I have my ribbons yeah I was going to say you going to you going to give that one up

34:33

and then I reluctantly surrender my ribbon which I was hoping she would let

34:39

me keep thank you thank you for um for doing that for me for being there um

34:46

pleasure what is that he's tired and hungry we all say goodbye right good

34:51

night and when I leave my fets stay behind

34:57

[Music]

35:17

this episode was produced by Crystal duim and Lissa Anderson with help from Caitlyn Roberts it was reported by me

35:25

Sam Anderson and edited by Wendy D and Lissa Anderson it was engineered by

35:31

Maran Lozano our executive producer is Paula Schuman original music by Marian

35:37

Lozano Dan Powell and Alicia baup factchecking by Caitlyn love special

35:44

thanks to Jake Silverstein Sasha Weiss and Sam dlck also to all the feret

35:50

people who showed me their ways Scarlet Grace saing Sally Heber Vicky McKim and

35:56

all the many others I met at at The Bash and at the hotel bar who told me that ferrets don't actually smell all that

36:03

bad and I should just get one Aaron man now runs sugar and spice

36:08

feret Tre and I am happy to report that last summer Genesis gave birth to a

36:14

litter of 10 gorgeous kits the father was

36:20

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animal I'm Sam Anderson thanks for listening

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[Music]

English (auto-generated)