



Functional and fashionable walking jackets for small animals are gaining popularity as more people take their caged pets out into the world.

Walking Accessories for Critters

From simple leashes to adjustable harnesses, here's a look at the latest in walking accessories for small animals. By Lisa Plummer

People aren't just walking their dogs these days. They're walking ferrets, rabbits and rats, too. As pet owners realize the benefits of environmental enrichment, more of them are choosing to take their small animals out of their habitats and into the world.

"Small animals need plenty of physical activity and exercise to remain healthy," said Annie Marcell, product development and marketing coordinator for Central Avian and Small Animal (Elk Grove Village, Ill.). "This is sometimes difficult to do when we keep our pets in confined spaces."

Luckily, a host of manufacturers now offer harnesses, walking jackets, collars and leashes suitable for all kinds of small animals to keep them safe and under control while they explore the great outdoors.

From simple leashes to fashionable walking jackets, here's a look at some of

the latest in walking accessories for small animals.

Harness and Lead Sets

Harnesses are the safest and most effective walking accessories for small animals, according to many manufacturers, because they're comfortable and secure, help prevent escape, allow greater control and apply pressure under the legs rather than to a pet's delicate neck.

For safety and comfort rolled into one, Super Pet, a brand from Central, makes the Comfort Harness & Stretchy Stroller Leash Set for small pets. Combining nylon mesh and soft cotton, the sporty harness is shaped like a vest and conforms to the critter's body.

Available in four sizes to fit rabbits, ferrets, rats and guinea pigs (and cats), the harness uses an adjustable fabric fastener, snaps and a quick-release buckle to help ensure a secure connection to the

stretchy cotton leash, which comes in 4- or 6-foot lengths. Both vests and leashes come in four bright, color-coordinated combinations.

"Our harnesses and leashes are the perfect solution [because] they allow people to safely get their pets out of their cages while keeping them safe and in control," said Marcell.

Some manufacturers make size-adjustable harnesses to enable one product to accommodate a variety of pets. For example, the Pet Pro Harness and Lead Set by ASA Pet Supplies Inc. (Toronto) adjusts to fit ferrets, rabbits, guinea pigs and even iguanas. Made of durable nylon webbing, the strong and easy-to-clean harness comes in two Indian prints.

A more delicate example is the Small Animal Lead & Harness made by Coastal Pet Products Inc. (Alliance, Ohio). The braided nylon set is available in black, red or blue, with a harness that can be adjusted to fit rabbits or ferrets as well as cats and iguanas.

Walking Jackets

Walking jackets—for added safety or just for show—are a popular choice because they provide the same function and control as a harness but offer more material coverage on the pet's body for extra comfort and security.

Marshall Ferrets & Pet Products (Wolcott, N.Y.) makes walking jackets for rabbits and ferrets. According to



The Ferret Fun Five-in-One by Premier Pet Products includes a quick-release collar, harness attachment, leash, bell and identification tag.

Diane Vair, Marshall's product marketing manager, walking jackets are an especially good choice for rabbits.

"Rabbits don't walk, they hop and tend to jump around in different directions," Vair said. "The walking jacket covers more of the animal's body so they can't slip out of it. It also gives them added comfort and extra security so the animal feels safe."

The company's rabbit walking jacket is made of durable, machine-washable cotton and comes in a multicolored plaid

design in one size to fit most bunnies. To reduce the chance of escaping, the jacket has fabric fastener closures and quick-release buckles that secure in front and behind the rabbit's forelegs. The walking jacket comes with a flexible, stretchy leash.

Marshall makes a ferret jacket, too, which comes in various fabrics and colors and includes a matching elasticized leash. It's adjustable, comfortable and durable, with quick-snap buckles so it's easy to

take on and off. There's also a bell attached so owners can keep track of their pets.

Just For Ferrets

Ferret owners in particular love to let their furry friends out of the cage. Now manufacturers that once made accessories only for dogs and cats have expanded into the world of ferret products.

Mirage Pet Products (Nixa, Mo.), a family-owned company that has been manufacturing pet products for 40 years,



A walking jacket provides extra coverage and security, so it's a good option for rabbits, which do more hopping than walking. This walking jacket from Marshall comes with a stretchy leash.

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The Comfort Harness & Stretchy Stroller Leash Set from Super Pet, a brand from Central Avian and Small Animal, fits small animals from rats to rabbits to guinea pigs.

began making ferret harnesses last year in response to overwhelming customer demand.

“As more and more people start using [harnesses], we’ve seen our sales skyrocket,” said Stephanie Davis, director of marketing. “The drive to accessorize and pamper pets is at an all-time high, despite the economy.”

Available in one adjustable size, the Mirage Harness is comfortable, escape-proof and comes in a variety of colors, designs and materials like vinyl, velvet and metallic. The most popular is the company’s sparkling “bling” harness, dotted with Austrian crystals. Although this harness was created specifically for ferrets, it can be adjusted to fit rabbits, guinea pigs and iguanas, too, Davis said.

The Ferret Fun Five-in-One by Premier Pet Products (Midlothian, Va.) includes everything a ferret owner would need to walk and keep track of a pet: a quick-release collar, harness attachment, leash, bell and identification tag. The fully adjustable set comes in 12 bright colors and fits all ferrets.



Adjustable collars and leads, like these from Asa Pet Supplies and Coastal Pet Products Inc., are designed to fit a variety of small animals.

According to Michelle Mullins, a training and behavior education assistant for Premier, ferrets can easily choke or slip out of neck collars, and the harness attachment adds the safety of a strap around the ribcage when walking the animal outdoors. Once snapped onto the collar, the attachment converts the accessory to a snug H-type harness, the safest design for preventing ferrets from escaping, she said.

Bells are another popular feature on small-animal accessories because they help pet parents keep track of their critters running outside of the cage. Marshall’s fully adjustable Bell Collars come in eight colors and include quick-snap buckles.

Marshall, a longtime maker of ferret products, offers a fully adjustable harness and lead set that comes in eight colors with quick-snap buckles and a matching 4-foot leash. For multiple-ferret households, the Tandem Coupler includes two ferret harnesses connected to one leash, eliminating tangled leads. It’s available in assorted colors with matching leashes.

They also have Sport Leads, frilly Fashion Dress Leads and flashy black and red Neoprene Harnesses for owners who like to dress their ferrets up.

Most of Marshall’s ferret products can be adjusted to fit other small animals, but they’re created specifically for ferrets.

“Our products are designed for the unique anatomy and habits of a ferret,” Vair said. “These items provide a safe way to take your pet outside without hampering the pet’s natural movements or comfort.”

How to Sell Walking Accessories

Selling walking accessories for small animals involves three steps, according

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Training Nibbles to Take a Walk

RABBITS, GUINEA PIGS and ferrets behave differently than dogs, for example, and need a little extra attention when it comes to leash training.

Here are some tips for using leashes and leads on small animals:

- Be gentle and speak soothingly as you ease the harness onto the pet. Make sure it fits properly, and that it's not too tight or too loose. You should be able to fit one finger between the harness and the animal's body.
- Let the pet wear the harness indoors at first, for short periods throughout the day. This will help the animal get accustomed to the feel of it before going outside. Never leave the pet unsupervised while wearing its new "wardrobe."
- Keep training sessions upbeat and positive using treats as a reward, especially when the animal remains calm. Working with a hungry pet often reaps the best results.
- After a few days or weeks of harness training, add the leash. Let the pet get used to dragging the leash behind him

for a few minutes several times a day to get used to its pull and weight.

- Once the pet has accepted the leash, hold onto it and follow the pet around, giving the animal its choice of direction. Add gentle restraint by tugging slightly on the leash to teach the animal about resistance. Try coaxing the pet using treats to walk with you. Never jerk on the leash except in an emergency.

- When you start outdoor training, stay close to home. Unlike walking a dog, the small animal takes the lead here. Walk slowly and be prepared for a lot of stopping and starting as the pet explores its environment. Keep the first outings brief and always end on a positive note.

- Constantly monitor your surroundings for potential hazards and use the leash to restrict the pet from getting into dangerous areas. The outdoors can provide a wonderful, exciting experience for your small animal, as long as you take the necessary precautions to keep it safe.

—Lisa Plummer

to manufacturers interviewed for this story.

First, when deciding what walking accessories to carry in your store, offer a wide variety. "A nice selection of products is a key ingredient in capturing sales," said Vair. "These products typically sell themselves because they fill a need that small-pet owners already have. The key is to offer different styles in order to satisfy each customer's tastes."

Second, train your staff to promote these products when customers purchase a new pet. Tim Brightwell, a national sales manager for Premier, suggests marketing and selling small animal leashes and leads as a necessity—just like a water bowl, cage or bedding.

"It's easier to upsell when the customer is excited about getting a new pet," Brightwell said.

Third, educate your customers about the benefits of exercise and environmental enrichment for their small animals. As more and more pet owners begin taking their nontraditional pets out for walks, they will be looking for ways to do it in a safe and controlled way.

"As we learn more and more about what pets need to remain mentally and physically healthy, pet owners are beginning to realize that small animals need plenty of exercise," said Marcell, from Central. "We also see a movement toward people wanting to cage animals as little as possible, to let animals roam and be free as much as possible. If you can walk your dog, why not your pet rabbit?" ■

Lisa Plummer is a freelance writer based in Las Vegas.

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