

COVER  
STORY



# RABBITS

Once considered primarily as children's Easter gifts, rabbits are fast gaining acceptance as charming and warm household companions.

## Revisited

text and photography

by Mary E. Cotter, Ed.D.

First-time visitors to Bill Stutts' New York City apartment are often startled to find a rabbit comfortably ensconced on his living room sofa. Another rabbit is stretched out under the coffee table, while two more cuddle together by the entrance to the dining room. Stutts, a successful businessman, and his wife, Cindy, a fashion designer, have shared their lives with rabbits for the past five years and refer to them as "the kids." And they are just two of a rapidly growing number of people who have discovered the unique pleasures of living with companion rabbits.

According to current data from the American Pet Products Manufacturers' Association (APPMA), rabbit ownership has increased dramatically over the past decade. From 1992 to 2000, the percentage of "small animal households" owning rabbits jumped from 24 percent to 40 per-

cent. There are now approximately 5.3 million companion rabbits owned by 2.2 million households in America. And while rabbits unfortunately continue to be bought as pets for children, the number of adults-only households owning rabbits among all households that own rabbits increased from 26 percent in 1996 to 39 percent in 2000.

What accounts for this increasing popularity? The single most significant factor is probably widespread access to the Internet, which makes information about rabbits more available to more people than ever before. The word is out on rabbits as house pets, and numerous rabbit-focused organizations maintain websites [see "For More Information," p. 21] that attract potential owners and offer profiles of adoptable rabbits. The Internet also makes it easy for new owners to get the information and support they need to care for rabbits as house pets.

### The House Rabbit

Although the rabbit's earliest relationship with humans was as a fur-and-food commodity, people were already keeping rabbits as pets by the 18th century. British poet William Cowper kept hares in his home to help combat his severe depression, and he wrote eloquently of his love and appreciation for these creatures as companion animals.

Rabbits can indeed make wonderful pets—for the right people. Pet owners frequently characterize themselves in terms of their animals—"I'm a dog person" or "I'm a cat person." But exactly what is a "rabbit person"?

According to Jennifer Saver, D.V.M. (herself a rabbit owner), a rabbit person is someone who enjoys observing as much as handling, and who does not get overly upset at a rabbit's natural tendencies, such as chewing and digging.

Rabbits have strikingly distinctive personalities. They can be as playful and silly as puppies or kittens, as independent and fascinating as cats, or as loyal and openly affectionate as dogs. And long-time rabbit owners claim that domestic rabbits are, in their own way, every bit as smart as cats and dogs. Dana Krempels, Ph.D., an evolutionary biologist at the University of Miami, sees daily examples of this in her group of 16 rabbits. "Their intelligence is very different from other species" she says, "but is just as adaptive and just as elegant." Rabbits can easily learn to respond to their names, as well as to simple words, and they learn to use litterboxes readily. They are adroit at getting over, under, around or through barriers intended to restrict them, and some owners seem almost proud of their rabbits' ability to negotiate household obstacles.

There are also those owners who, thinking that they have succeeded in training their rabbits, discover that their rabbits have actually trained them. Ann Casama of Fair Lawn, NJ, conditioned her rabbit, Patrick, to return to his cage by ringing a toy bell and offering him a treat, but within a short period of time, Patrick began ringing the bell on his own and waiting expectantly for his treat. If Casama does not respond as quickly as Patrick would like, he rings the bell again.

Mixed breeds such as the helicop lop have an offbeat appeal that many find irresistible.



## Learn Before You Leap

Because of rabbits' enormous appeal, people often acquire them for the wrong reasons, and without first doing the necessary homework. Their initial low cost (usually less than \$20) encourages impulse purchases, especially for "occasions" such as Easter and birthdays, and their rapid reproduction rate (they can have a new litter approximately every 30 days) encourages the view that they are easily replaceable. In fact, the potential lifespan of a well-cared-for indoor rabbit is seven to 10 years—and some live into their teens. Their soft fur and cuddly appearance give the impression that they are akin to animated stuffed toys—perfect low-maintenance "starter pets." As a result, when uninformed owners are faced with the daily reality of rabbit care and maintenance, the rabbit often ends up in a shelter.

"Rabbit ownership," says Heidi Hoefler, D.V.M., "requires the same commitment as owning a puppy, and should be taken just as seriously." Marinell Harriman, president of the national House Rabbit Society (HRS) concurs: "A rabbit has the best chance of becoming a well-loved companion if the adopter is well-prepared."

Books and Internet resources can help close the knowledge gap, but there's nothing like interacting with rabbits "up close and personal" to give you a feel for this species. Pet shops and rabbit shows, however, are usually high-stress settings for rabbits. Foster homes, as well as some progressive shelters, offer a better chance to meet rabbits and to get to know them in an environment conducive to relaxed interactions, where their personalities can shine.

## Kids and Rabbits: Delight or Dilemma?

Living with a companion rabbit can pose special challenges to families with young children, particularly toddlers. Joanne Hamoy, rabbit-care coordinator at Stevens-Swan Humane Society in Utica, NY, is blunt about it: "Young children and rabbits do not mix, and this fact cannot be emphasized enough."

Children are naturally loving. However, "loving" to a small child often means holding, cuddling and carrying an animal around—behaviors that make most rabbits feel insecure and frightened, as they would in the grasp of a predator. Many rabbits are accidentally dropped by children, resulting in broken legs and backs. When mishandled, rabbits who scratch or bite to protect themselves are often surrendered to shelters, where they may be euthanized for "bad behavior."

According to the APPMA, "getting children to accept responsibility" is an often-reported drawback of rabbit ownership, and rabbits purchased to teach children responsibility are often neglected after the novelty wears off. These rabbits are left to languish in dirty cages, often with only sporadic food, water and social contact, until the child's parent finally relinquishes the animal to a shelter or—even worse—"gives them their freedom" by releasing them outdoors.

But this doesn't mean that rabbits and children can never coexist happily. It does mean that an adult should always be the primary caretaker and should supervise any children who interact with the rabbit. Children who learn from adults how to interact appropriately with rabbits often form lasting bonds with these small family members and develop a respect for animals that carries into adulthood.



## Choosing a Bunny Buddy

There are more than four dozen recognized breeds of domestic rabbits, which vary in size, color, fur type, body type and ear type. Weight can range from about two pounds to more than 20 pounds. Many breeds are very striking in appearance, and they attract buyers with their good looks. As with other species, however, the mixed breed often has a kind of offbeat appeal, and what breeders see as faults can add charm and distinctiveness. Owners of mixed breeds delight, for example, in their “unicorn lops” (one ear up, one ear down) or “helicopter lops” (both ears straight out to the side).

A frequent misunderstanding is that smaller breeds require less living space than larger ones, but even the smallest dwarf bunny can be extremely energetic and needs room to run. Temperaments of individual rabbits—even within a breed—can vary tremendously. The larger breeds (many of whom are sold as “meat” or “lab” rabbits) are sometimes described as “gentle giants,” with calm and placid dispositions nicely suited to family life.

Male rabbits tend to spray, and females tend to be territorial, but these patterns are significantly reduced or eliminated by neutering. A mature (older than one year), neutered rabbit is often a better choice as a family pet than a younger rabbit, whose “raging hormones” can result in undesirable behaviors. All in all, the best way to select a companion rabbit is to set aside preconceptions regarding breed, sex and age, and to meet the rabbit and interact with him for long enough to get a feel for his individual personality.

## Opt to Adopt

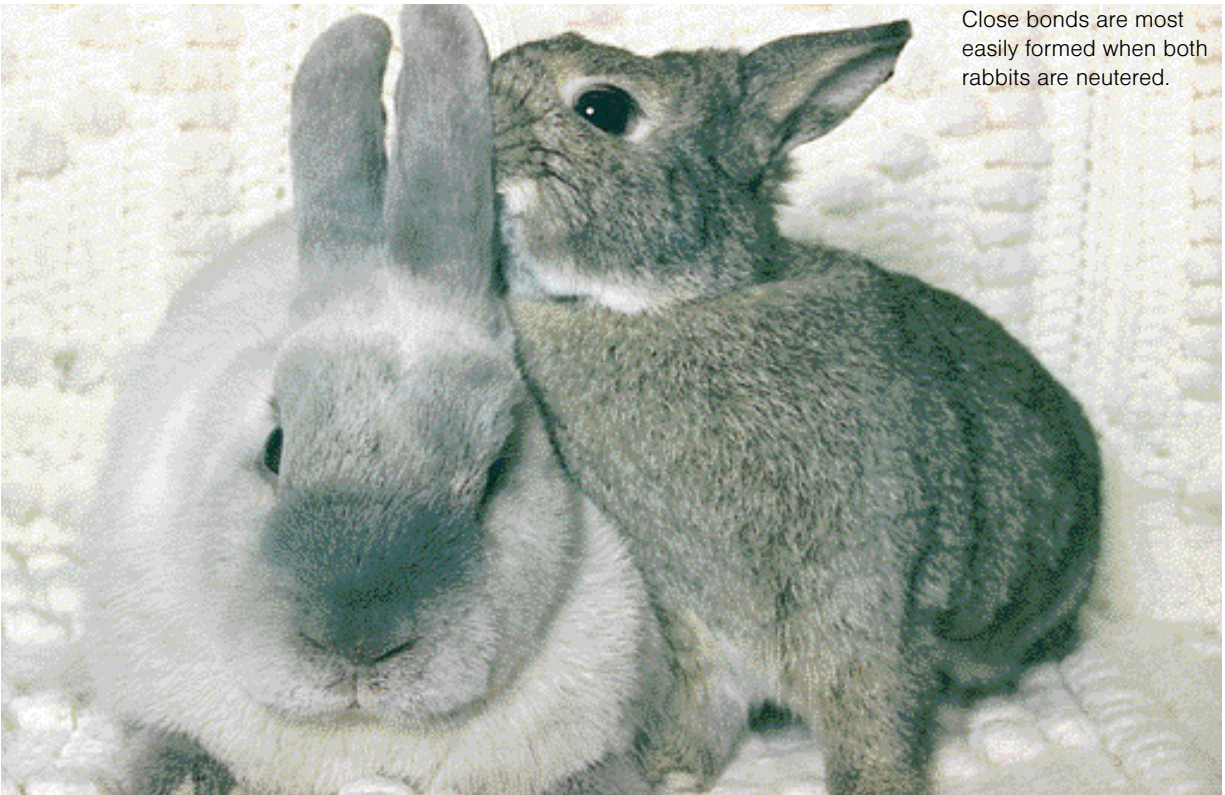
Many people interested in acquiring a rabbit visit their local pet store, unaware that scores of rabbits—purebred and mixed breed—are relinquished to shelters each year. Although statistics are remarkably hard to come by, Connie Howard, director of shelter programs for the Englewood,

CO-based American Humane Association, reports that rabbits are the third most frequently surrendered animals (right after cats and dogs).

Some shelters, such as the Peninsula Humane Society in San Mateo, CA, and the Stevens-Swan Humane Society, have teamed up with rescue organizations such as the HRS. Together, they have developed successful fostering programs that place shelter rabbits in foster care until appropriate homes can be found, as well as owner-education programs that head off surrenders by helping owners solve problems when they first arise.

Adopting from a shelter or foster home, rather than purchasing from a pet store or breeder, is a win-win situation. Prospective adopters can visit the shelter or foster home and interact with rabbits of different breeds, ages, sizes and dispositions. Shelters and rescue organizations that know their foster rabbits as individuals can match an owner with a rabbit whose personality will be a “good fit,” and many rabbits offered through shelters or rescue organizations are already neutered.

Adopting more than one rabbit can be tricky. Not all rabbits get along, and serious injuries can occur quickly if they fight. Neutered male-female pairs tend to bond most easily, though same-sex pairs can also work—if both are neutered.



Close bonds are most easily formed when both rabbits are neutered.

## Veterinary Care

In the United States, rabbits do not require annual vaccinations; however, regular checkups can help detect small problems before they become big ones. Common health problems include dental abnormalities (incisor overgrowth and molar spurs), gastrointestinal problems and ear and upper respiratory infections.

Companion rabbits should also be spayed or neutered once they reach sexual maturity (about four to six months of age) by a veterinarian experienced in rabbit surgery. This not only reduces hormone-driven behaviors such as lunging, mounting, spraying and boxing, but also protects females from uterine cancer, which occurs in more than 50 percent of mature rabbits.

Finding a skilled rabbit veterinarian can be difficult. Rabbits are not commonly studied in veterinary school, and practitioners who are not knowledgeable about rabbits may do more harm than good in their efforts to help. Amoxicillin, for example, is a common antibiotic for dogs and cats, but it can be lethal to rabbits. The HRS maintains a list of recommended veterinarians across the country, which can be accessed at [www.rabbit.org](http://www.rabbit.org).

## Rabbits as Roommates

When you first bring your rabbit home, he is likely to be somewhat timid in his new surroundings. But given time and the freedom to explore, he will quickly make himself at home. As prey animals, rabbits steer clear of open spaces where they feel exposed, preferring to hug the wall and hide under furniture. A rabbit's typical pattern of exploration is to start from an area of perceived safety and to venture out a few

feet at a time, increasing his range with each successive trip. Some spirited thumping is not unusual as the rabbit encounters new aspects of his environment.

Territory is claimed and marked in several different ways—some of which can be disconcerting to new owners. Mature, unneutered males spray urine, and both males and females (even those who are reliably litterbox-trained) may leave what many owners tactfully refer to as “calling cards”—fecal pellets containing anal gland secretions that relay information to other rabbits and mark territory boundaries. They may also mark their territory by rubbing objects firmly and repeatedly with their chins, releasing a substance (imperceptible to humans) from a scent gland under the chin. Some rabbits consider human beings their own personal property, and many an unsuspecting owner has been liberally “marked” in more ways than one.

Most rabbits adapt remarkably quickly to the hustle, bustle and noise of a normal household, particularly if their cage or pen is placed in a high-activity area, such as a family room. This gives the rabbit a safe place from which to see, hear and smell all that is going on. Housing a rabbit in a child's room or an extra bedroom, where there are sporadic bursts of activity, may actually delay the rabbit's adjustment to normal family life.

Rabbits can also get along quite well with most domestic cats and many breeds of dogs. Even cats and dogs who chase small animals outdoors tend to accept indoor rabbits as co-equal family members and usually do not harass them if the owner is present. Introductions must be done carefully, and supervision of interactions is always a good idea.

## CARING FOR A HOUSE RABBIT

**HOUSING:** House rabbits need cages at least three to four feet long. Wire-bottom cages, though common in large “rabbitries,” can cause, or exacerbate, foot ulcerations. A better choice is a large dog crate or a puppy exercise pen. (See listing for *House Rabbit Habitats* in box, “For More Information,” p. 21.) Some house rabbits are never caged, but a totally free-range house rabbit requires a high level of rabbit-proofing and supervision.

**EXERCISE:** The House Rabbit Society recommends several hours per day, or about 30 hours per week, of out-of-cage exercise time.

**TOYS:** A busy rabbit is a happy rabbit. A bunny can entertain herself for hours with a simple cardboard carton, toys such as plastic baby keys, an untreated grass mat or some old towels or fabric.

**LITTER TRAINING:** To litter-train your bunny, watch to see which corner of his cage he selects as his “bathroom,” and place a litterbox there. Line the box with newspaper and fill it with grass hay (such as Timothy, Brome or Orchard Grass) or pelleted sawdust litters. Pine and cedar shavings and clay litters (clumping or nonclumping) are not recommended.

**RABBIT-PROOFING:** A rabbit's teeth grow continuously throughout her life, and many rabbits are prodigious chewers. You can “rabbit-proof” an indoor exercise area by covering (or making inaccessible) all electrical wires, house plants and anything else your rabbit is likely to chew.

**DIET:** A mature rabbit should be fed a daily diet of fresh, unlimited grass hay, supplemented with a salad of dark

green leafy vegetables daily. Commercial rabbit pellets—preferably a high-fiber brand—may be given in very limited quantities. Fresh water should always be available. If your rabbit stops eating and moving his bowels for 12 hours or longer, seek expert care immediately.

**HANDLING AND GENERAL CARE:** Lift up your rabbit by supporting his forequarters with one hand and his hindquarters with the other. Hold him snugly against your body or tuck him under your arm (football-style) so that his eyes are covered. Never pick up a rabbit by the ears; this can cause serious injury. Regular brushing helps remove excess hair. Ask your veterinarian to show you how to clip your rabbit's nails, and trim them regularly. Excessively long nails can break off at the base and open a path for infection. —M.E.C.



Safe toys, such as plastic baby keys, can entertain a rabbit for hours.

## For More Information

### BOOKS

*House Rabbit Handbook*

by Marinell Harriman

Advice and tips on behavior, health, diet and housing.

*Why Does My Rabbit*

by Anne McBride

The inside story on rabbit behavior, based on the author's doctoral dissertation.

*Ferrets, Rabbits, and Rodents: Clinical Medicine and Surgery*

Hillyer & Quesenberry, eds. Useful for anyone seeking to understand common clinical problems.

*House Rabbit Habitats*

comp. by Kathy Anderson

Contains plans and photos for roomy homes. Bizylizy3@aol.com; (415) 459-6735

*ASPCA Pet Care Guide for Kids*

by Mark Evans

A practical guide that teaches children how to be responsible rabbit owners.

### WEBSITES

[www.rabbit.org](http://www.rabbit.org)

The national House Rabbit Society's comprehensive site on rabbit health, care and behavior, with articles by licensed HRS educators and expert veterinarians, along with links for adoptable rabbits across the country.

[www.mindspring.com/~morfz/-rebrefs.html](http://www.mindspring.com/~morfz/-rebrefs.html)

A source of recommended veterinarians, a drug-dosage calculator, articles on health and behavior and links to other rabbit-related sites.

Many new rabbit owners are surprised at their pets' gregariousness. Iris Farrand, whose rabbit Lance was rescued from a meat market, sent this account to the HRS: "Perhaps the most wonderful thing about Lance is the joy he takes in social interaction. When my husband passed away, Lance helped to make an unbearable time so much easier. He acted as a host, greeting friends who came to pay condolences and sitting next to each person on the couch. Thanks to him, the sadness and solemnity of that time was often relieved with laughter."

A rabbit's natural schedule is convenient for working people. Neither diurnal nor nocturnal, rabbits are crepuscular—most active in early mornings and evenings. "Eric's schedule dovetails perfectly with mine," says John Kelly, associate director of financial aid at New York University Law School. Kelly lets Eric out for a run in the living room each morning. When he heads for the kitchen to prepare breakfast, Eric is at his heels. When Kelly comes home from work, Eric awakens from his daytime snooze and is ready for action again. "The only problem," says Kelly, "is that Eric is like an alarm clock, and he won't let me sleep in on weekends."

After decades of being categorized as "pocket pets," rabbits are coming into their own as companions comparable to dogs, cats and birds. If the next decade is like the last, by 2010 more Americans will have learned what Bill and Cindy Stutts—and 7.4 million others—already know: If you want a fascinating, funny, warm and wonderful companion animal, try a rabbit. *AW*

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