

Rabbits as Pets

Our topics for this week are:

- **The natural behaviors of pet rabbits**
- **Approaching and catching pet rabbits**
- **How to handle pet rabbits**

Rabbits captured on the Iberian Peninsula of Europe were domesticated by the Phoenicians about 3,000 years ago. By 100 BC, Roman armies kept rabbits as a source of food, introduced them to the British Isles, and confined them in walled pens. If they escaped and became pests, the Romans hunted them with ferrets, which could follow the rabbits into their burrows. Ferreting rabbits is still a means of rabbit hunting in some countries where rabbits burrow and live in groups (warrens), such as the United Kingdom. Rabbits were selectively bred as a farm animal in Europe during the Middle Ages by monks. By the 16th century, rabbits were kept as pets in addition to being a source of meat and fur. Ships kept rabbits as a source of fresh meat on voyages. They were introduced to Australia and New Zealand in the mid-19th century where they became feral and a pest for agriculture. Rabbits were raised in the U.S. as a primary source of fresh meat for civilians during World War II.

Rabbits and hares are lagomorphs, not rodents. Hares are larger with black ear tips. Rabbits are born blind, naked, and helpless in dens. Hares are born in the open with open eyes, fur over the body, and able to run within minutes. Rabbits are kept as pets and common laboratory animals; hares are not.

Male rabbits are called bucks. Females are does, and young rabbits are kits or bunnies.

Natural Behavior of Rabbits

European (domesticated) rabbits have different behavior than the behavior of the North American eastern cottontail rabbit. Cottontail rabbits do not burrow and do not tolerate the presence of other rabbits. The European rabbit, the ancestor of domesticated rabbits, are social prey animals that live in burrows of up to 30 individuals.

Rabbits like to explore and forage for food, interact with other members of their group, and huddle together when resting. Self-grooming and mutual grooming of others is frequently performed in a European rabbit warren. Failure to groom can be a sign of disease. They are herbivorous, crepuscular, and nocturnal, and like to burrow in soft, sandy dirt. They are born without hair and their eyes closed. Immediate acceptance and care from the mother is essential to survival. Adult size ranges from 2 lb. to more than 15 lb. Their bones are fragile compared to other animals of the same size. Their teeth grow continuously and are normally worn down if allowed to gnaw abrasive food or objects. Rabbits are coprophagic and eat cecotrophs directly

from their anus about three to eight hours after eating. They may thump a rear foot if agitated and may spray urine. Rabbits are prey for many predators, such as dogs, cats, coyotes, ferrets, large birds, and snakes.

Sexually mature rabbits are quite territorial. They assess and claim their territory and possessions by odor. They have glands on their chin and in their perineum which they use to rub on possessions. Both males and females will seek their highest possible role in dominance of others. Sexually intact male rabbits can be territorially aggressive and will vocalize (growl, grunt), charge, and claw with its front feet, particularly if threatened by a child, small dog, or cat. Females can be aggressive if their young are perceived to be in danger. Adulteration of the doe's pheromones on kits by handling kits without gloves can lead to the mother's rejection of her babies.

Young rabbits should be separated by gender at three months to prevent early matings. In males, the testicles are the most obvious gender determining structure. Males will need to be housed individually, if not neutered.

Neutered male rabbits, called lapins, are more interactive and easy to handle and therefore, better pets for children. Neutered males also are less likely to attempt to mark territory with urine and feces.

Approaching and Catching

Handlers should grasp the skin behind the rabbit's neck while the other hand scoops up the rump. The rabbit should be turned so that its head is tucked under the handler's arm while he maintains a grasp on the neck and support the hindquarters. This is called the football hold. Some rabbits will bite, so care must be taken to avoid putting fingers near their mouth.

No effort should be made to restrain or pet the head. Rabbits will strongly resist manipulation of their head, and attempted restraint of the head could lead to a broken neck. Chemical restraint is necessary for examining or treating the head or neck.

Heavy gloves should be worn for protection from scratches if trying to separate fighting rabbits.

Handling for Routine Care and Management

Rabbits should never be given an opportunity to kick while being restrained or released. Rabbits will try to twist and kick when resisting restraint which can cause back injuries, including fractures. Rabbits have thin, light bones and very powerful hind legs. If they kick with suspended hind legs, they can fracture their spine or otherwise damage their spinal cord. In addition, they also have sharp claws that can injure the handler, if allowed to kick during handling. Slick floors can also endanger rabbits due to risk of back injury.

The ear flaps of rabbits are important to their hearing and contribute to heat dissipation. They are delicate structures that should never be used for restraint.

A safe means of restraint is to gently scruff the skin on the back of the neck. If using a scruff hold, the hind legs must be supported and restrained. Lifting a rabbit by a scruff hold

alone is likely to result in the rabbit fracturing its back by kicking. The safest means to move a rabbit in a travel crate is to support it with both of the handler's arms.

Most routine procedures can be performed on rabbits while they are in sternal restraint on a table. A nonslip mat should be placed on the table. Otherwise, rabbits may struggle, kick frantically and fracture bones. The handler should keep at least one hand on the rabbit at all times. If holding with one hand, the rabbit's rump should be pushed against the handler's abdomen while one hand presses down on the top of its shoulders. If restraining with two hands, one hand presses down on the shoulders and the other on the rump. Toenails can be trimmed with the rabbit in sternal position by lifting one foot up at a time. Additional restraint can be applied with towel wraps, as used with cats.

Examination or treatment of the ventral aspects of the body can be performed by grasping the rabbit's front legs with one hand, turning the rabbit over and supporting the hindquarters with the other hand. The rabbit's body should then be in a "C" shape.

Special care is required in handling baby rabbits. Handlers should wear plastic gloves and rub the babies with nest bedding when returned to nest, to keep human odor off the babies.

Rabbits should be removed from cages rump first to prevent feet from getting caught in a wire mesh floor. To place a rabbit into a cage or box, it should go in rump first facing a side wall or facing outward. This prevents it from kicking back and spraying litter out of the box and scratching the handler's arms. The handler should ensure that the rabbit's legs are resting on the surface and ready to support its weight before releasing by pressing the rabbit down and then releasing with both hands at the same time.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Pet rabbits are European rabbits, not American cottontails**
- 2. Rabbits have fragile bones and strong legs putting them at high risk for broken backs.**
- 3. A rabbit's ears should never be used as a means of handling or restraining them.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 200 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.