

Understanding Pet Rabbits' Behavior

Our topics for this week are origins and aspects of rabbit behaviors, including:

- **Behaviors of ancestors of the modern domestic rabbit**
- **Daily grooming behaviors**
- **Territorial aggression**

Origin of Domestic 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

Pet rabbits which are European 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.

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. Domestic rabbits like to gnaw and burrow which can be destructive to its containment, such as rugs and furniture.**
- 2. The primary defense of frightened rabbits is to flee quickly and chaotically, which can risk serious injuries to their fragile bones.**
- 3. Adult rabbits can display fearless aggression in defending their territory or young.**

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 250 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.