

Assessing the Behavior of Shelter Rabbits

Shelter staff and volunteers can help rabbits get adopted into the right homes by doing a basic form of behavioral assessment on their rabbits. But you must remember that rabbits will often behave very differently in a shelter environment than they would in a home. Keeping that basic fact in mind will help you to avoid the mistake of labeling some rabbits as “biters” when they are simply cage protective.

Shelter employees should also note that rabbits are not like cats and dogs, and should not be temperament tested the way that cats and dogs are. We have heard, for example, of shelters using the artificial hand they use for dog temperament testing, and sticking it in the rabbit cage over and over. If the bunny attacks it they will euthanize him for aggression. Unfortunately, most rabbits would attack an artificial hand in this way.

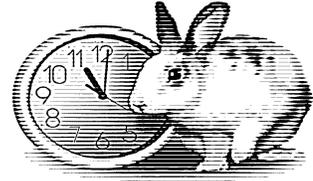
One way to avoid problems like this would be to have the person evaluating the rabbit spend time with the rabbit outside of a cage. Placing the rabbit in an exercise pen for a couple of hours is one way to see them outside of a cage, but spending quality time with the rabbit, maybe at one’s desk, or even at home for a couple of days over the weekend, would give the observer a better chance of seeing the true behavior of the rabbit. But even then, because rabbits are prey animals, many will not fully come out of their shells until they are living permanently in the home environment. So please remember that what you see in the rabbits at your shelter may or may not give you a good sense of what they will be like once adopted. It is really not possible to assess the behavior or personality of a rabbit with a single test. Observing the rabbit over time, and working with the rabbit to make him or her more comfortable, is really your goal.

Many rabbits, in a shelter environment, will be either shy or aggressive, and it’s your job as the staff person or volunteer to help that rabbit to live up to his or her potential, and to find that perfect home.

Shy Rabbits

One of the most common misconceptions people have about rabbits is that they like to be held and cuddled. This is probably because they look like plush toys. Unfortunately, many people bring home rabbits without realizing the true nature of rabbits, and that’s one of the main reason these lovely, intelligent creatures end up at the shelter after they reach sexual maturity and begin to assert their strong personalities.

Educating the public and managing their expectations about rabbits is one way to handle this issue. Reminding potential adopters that rabbits are ground-dwelling creatures for whom being held up in the air is uncomfortable is an important point, and should be part of the pre-adoption counseling. And certainly the fact that many rabbits will scratch, struggle, or even bite while



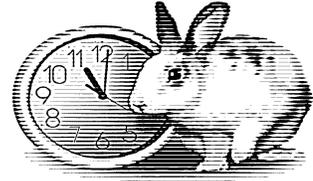
being held is not a sign of a problematic temperament; it is a sign that rabbits, for the most part, don't like to be held.

On top of the problem with holding rabbits, many rabbits are naturally shy. Having quiet rooms where potential adopters can sit with rabbits, on the floor, perhaps with some toys, is a way to allow the adopter and the rabbit to start to get to know each other. Letting the adopter give the rabbit a small treat helps to form a little bit of trust as well. And remind adopters that the more quiet time that the person spends with the rabbit at home, without danger and demands, the more the rabbit will come to trust the person and a bond will form.

“Aggressive” Rabbits

While many rabbits are calm, shy, or docile, many other rabbits express their personalities in ways that may be more challenging to people. Biting or growling at a person, especially in a shelter environment, is one way that rabbits can lose their lives. This is especially concerning in the shelter environment where often an animal who bites - for whatever reason - is labeled “dangerous” and unfortunately euthanized. But there are a number of reasons why a rabbit may bite or growl, and learning what those reasons are can help you to better understand the rabbits under your care, and give you the tools to deal with them.

1. Many unneutered or unspayed rabbits will growl, bite, circle, and mount thanks to sexual frustration. Neutering males and spaying females can dramatically reduce these kinds of behaviors.
2. Rabbits have poor near-distance vision, and have a blind spot right in front of their nose. For that reason, many rabbits will lunge at or bite a hand that approaches their nose, because it startles them. Try to approach the rabbits by petting the side of their body, the top of the head, or other areas that don't involve you putting your hand right in front of their face. In the shelter environment, just as you post signs in the dog kennels to ask the public to “DO NOT PUT FINGERS THROUGH BARS” you need to do the same for rabbits.
3. Some rabbits, if they come from an abusive situation, may react to their fear and confusion by biting. These rabbits need time to learn to trust humans again.
4. Many rabbits are cage-protective, because of their natural territorial nature. That means that shelter staff must be careful when cleaning the cage or removing the cage for a health exam or to meet a potential adopter. For rabbits who lunge, keep your hand above his head and then calmly and quickly bring it down to the top of his head. If he lets you touch his head, very softly stroke it. Eventually he should associate your hand in the cage with a nice nose rub, not being grabbed.
5. Rabbits will bite when they are frightened, such as when they are being held and have a fear of falling, or when they are defending themselves against what they perceive to be a predator (even if that predator is you).



6. Rabbits cannot speak, so one of the ways in which they communicate important information is nipping. If a person is doing something the rabbit doesn't like, they may react with a small (but sharp) bite. This is the bunny's way of telling you that you've irritated them. But it doesn't mean that the rabbit is 'aggressive.'

NEVER HIT A RABBIT! The minute you hit a rabbit, no matter how lightly you do it, you have become a "predator attacking that rabbit." Nature tells that rabbit to fight back in order to save its own life. And, in the process, you will likely get bit. Rabbits are not like any other animal that will tolerate and learn from being reprimanded. It "never" ends well when you hit a rabbit.

Some rabbits may seem more aggressive than the above scenarios would indicate. If you have a rabbit at your shelter who seems extra aggressive, then you may want to reach out to a volunteer from House Rabbit Society or another rescue group. They may be able to foster the rabbit for you and work with him.

Handling Rabbits to Reduce Stress

Handling rabbits in the shelter environment poses its own set of concerns. The shelter is a difficult environment for rabbits, a typically quiet prey species, who don't do well in the noisy, barking-dog, hustle-bustle of the daily shelter routine. Because of this, rabbits can react in ways that appear to be aggressive to the shelter employee or volunteer, who may not have had much exposure to these intelligent, often misunderstood creatures.

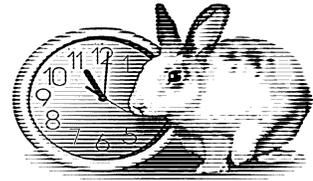
These guidelines are meant to assist shelter staff and volunteers in learning ways to better interact with rabbits in the shelter, and to carefully and safely handle them. Both for the sake of the rabbit, and for the individual involved.

SCRUFFING

There is much debate about "scruffing" of rabbits. This is the process of picking them up by the skin at the back of their neck. The House Rabbit Society advises against scruffing a rabbit for the following reasons:

- 1) It stretches the connective tissue and can cause it to tear, causing injury to the rabbit
- 2) This manner of handling a rabbit imitates being "caught by a predator" and is frightening for them.
- 3) Holding a rabbit loosely in this manner can contribute to a broken back, if the rabbit kicks out hard and hits something or overextends its spine.

There are much better alternatives to handling a rabbit than scruffing it. Constant scruffing keeps the rabbit in a fearful situation and lessens his adoptability because he becomes frightened of people and unwilling to be held.



RABBIT HOLDING TECHNIQUES

Since we're talking about rabbits biting, let's look first at a technique to hold a rabbit who may nip in order to be let down. When you pick up and hold a rabbit who is frightened of being held, he may nip your arm or shoulder. If you put him right down, guess what? That rabbit now has you trained. Every time you pick up that rabbit, he will bite to get you to put it down. So, using your superior human intelligence, you must train the rabbit that you "will not" put it down when he bites. And, as part of that training, you can hold the rabbit in a certain position to prevent her reaching your shoulder or arm and nipping at you.

Hold the rabbit in one arm, away from your chest. This leaves your other hand available to control her, and close the cage door, etc.

You've all experienced the rabbit who literally "flails" her legs when you hold her. She can be frightening and you can easily get scratched. Here are some techniques for holding the rabbit who kicks a lot in her effort to get down.

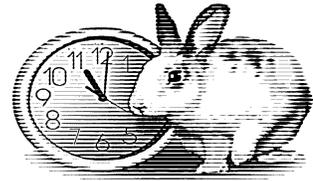
Hug bunny close to your chest, with his legs pointed away from you. Hold very firmly with both hands, one across his chest and one holding the pelvis. This is a tight hold, ensuring bunny does not snap his spine with a strong, outward kick. This hold also protects you from getting kicked and scratched.

The benefit to holding bunny in this "outward bear hug" position is to allow him calm down while you still have a secure hold on him. Talk calmly to bunny while holding him, to help him settle down. If transporting bunny to a pen, you can easily set him down on all fours from this position.

You can also hold a rabbit in a laid-back position, to transport him from one place to another. This can be useful when walking from one room to the next, with a rabbit who gets upset about being held. You need to have a firm hold on the rabbit, using both hands. One underneath to support the rabbit's body, and one on top to hold him firmly still.

Often, you can walk around the shelter, holding bunny in this manner, to let people know that they can be held in a calm manner. Some bunnies will nearly fall asleep when held in this position. This does take practice, however, so we do not recommend that you do this in an unprotected area. This also works well if you have to walk past dogs. Bunny cannot see the dogs from this position, and is less likely to become frightened and struggle to get down.

Very often, when returning a rabbit to his cage, he will "launch" himself at the door of the cage, flying through the air, toward the cage door. Unfortunately, if you don't have a good hold on bunny, he can hit the side of the cage and fall to the floor. This can result in broken legs, broken backs, or worse - death. It's very important that you transport bunny carefully back to his cage.

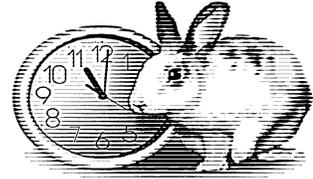


One technique is to “cover” bunny’s eyes with one hand, when approaching his cage. That way he won’t know when you’re there and won’t make the big leap. You can also use a technique called the “football” hold, to place bunny, “butt first” back into the cage. You can also carry a scared rabbit with this method; his head tucked between your elbow and your body.

Understanding Body Language

Understanding how rabbits communicate is important if either shelter staff or potential adopters are going to understand even a little bit about what rabbits feel. Following are some common forms of communication, and some of their meanings:

- **Chinning** — Rabbits chins contain scent glands, so they rub their chin on items to indicate that they belong to them.
- **Binky** — (Dancing and hopping madly): A sign of pure joy & happiness!
- **Standing on Hind Legs** — May be checking something out. Also used for begging.
- **Flat on the ground, legs spread out to the side or behind** — Relaxation, bliss
- **Upside down, legs in the air** — Rabbits will typically do this when in total bliss, and often after a big bout of binkying.
- **Territorial droppings** — Droppings that are not in a pile, but are scattered, are signs that this territory belongs to the rabbit. This will often occur upon entering a new environment.
- **Playing** — Rabbits like to push or toss objects around. They may also race madly around the house, jump on and off of the couch and act like a kid that's had too much sugar.
- **Thumping** — Rabbits often are displeased when you rearrange their stuff. They are creatures of habit and when they get things just right, they like them to remain that way, and may thump in anger.
- **Thumping** — He's frightened, mad or trying to tell you that there's danger (in his opinion).
- **Tooth Grinding** — Indicates contentment, like a cats purr. Loud grinding can indicate pain.
- **Tooth Chattering** — Loud grinding or chattering can indicate pain.
- **Sniffing** — May be annoyed or just talking to you. Some unspayed females sniff loudly when being handled.
- **Grunts** — Usually angry, watch out or you could get bit!
- **Honking** — Sign of horniness, usually in an unneutered male.
- **Shrill scream** — Extreme pain or fear.
- **Feet circling** — Usually indicates sexual behavior. He/She's in love.
- **Spraying** — Males that are not neutered will mark female rabbits in this manner as well as their territory. Females will also spray.
- **Pulling out hair; collecting hay** — This could be a pregnancy or a false pregnancy. Usually just unspayed females may build a nest & pull hair from their chest and stomach to line the nest.



Owner Surrender Forms

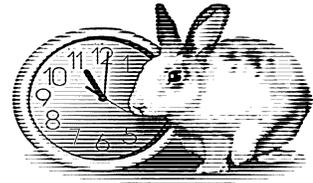
Behavioral questionnaires for people relinquishing their rabbits can provide *potentially* valuable information. If the rabbit was a house rabbit, and the owner spent any real time with the rabbit, they may be able to give you some information about what the rabbit was like that can help you to understand him, and to place him in a good home. Of course, many people surrendering their animals did not take the time to get to know these animals at all, so it may not be that useful. But having owners fill out surrender forms (see the questions at the end of this document which can serve as a starting point for your form) is still a useful exercise. You may find out that the rabbit was confined to a backyard cage where dogs barked at him all day. You may find that he lived in a house where a small child chased him around. Or you may find that he lived in a hutch and got no attention at all. All of these things can be useful to you in understanding the rabbit now in your care.

Using Cage Cards

Once you've spent some time with the new bunny at your shelter, you may have some sense of what he or she is like, keeping in mind the central caveat that the rabbit will not behave in a shelter environment like he will at home. At the end of this document you will find a cage card that your staff or volunteers can fill out with basic information about the bunny's personality. As staff and volunteers spend more time with the rabbit, they may find out more about the bunny's personality and they can print out and fill out a new form with the updated information. This card should be hung on the bunny's cage so that potential adopters can read about the rabbit's personality and needs.

Adoption Screening

Matching the right rabbit to the right adopter is a crucial aspect of successful rehoming. Adopters must be fully aware of the needs of rabbits in general, and of this rabbit in particular. Using House Rabbit Society's adoption questionnaires can help you to find out if the adopter is the right person for the rabbit, and using the information you and your staff have developed about the rabbit can help you to find out if the rabbit is the right pet for the person.



**INTAKE QUESTIONS FOR OWNERS
RELINQUISHING A RABBIT:**

How old is the rabbit?

What sex is the rabbit? How do you know?

Spayed/neutered? (ask for vet's name/number)

Has the rabbit ever had a litter?

Has the rabbit ever had contact with any other rabbit(s)? When was the last time?

Where did you buy the rabbit or how did you acquire the rabbit?

How long have you had the rabbit?

Has the rabbit been housed indoors or out? Type of cage?

What other kinds of animals has the rabbit been exposed to?

What bedding materials were used for the rabbit? Pine/cedar chips?

Has the rabbit ever been to a vet? Name/phone number of vet?

Who was in charge of rabbit care in your household?

How often/hard does the rabbit usually bite or scratch?

How many kids usually interact with the rabbit; how many adults?

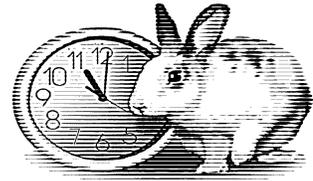
Has the rabbit ever been out of his cage? How often?

What health problems has the rabbit had? (fleas, ticks, fur mites, ear mites, dental problems, skin problems, runny eyes, runny nose, sneezing, anorexia, digestive problems)

What kind of (commercial) food has the rabbit been eating? Has the rabbit ever had vegetables? Hay?

How does the rabbit drink water - bowl or bottle?

Rabbit's temperament/personality? (friendly, shy, aggressive, fearful, etc.)



Hello, I'm _____!



I'm a great bunny for:

- First Time Bunny Owners
- Experienced Bunny Owners

I think other bunnies are:

- Interesting
- I love them

I am:

- Out-going
- Friendly
- Calm

- Territorial
- Shy
- Dominant
- Tidy
- Aloof

- Nervous
- Curious
- Eager to Please
- Sweet
- Demanding

I like :

- To Chew
- To Decorate
- To Dig

- To Explore
- To Run
- To Binky

- Dogs
- Cats
- Other Bunnies

I don't like:

- To Be Held
- To Be Picked Up
- To Be Groomed
- Other bunnies

I'm recommended for homes with:

- No Kids
- Kids- All Ages
- Kids- 7 and up
- Kids- 14 and up

