



## **The Dating Game**

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(Wisconsin House Rabbit News, Vol. 8, No. 1, March 2001)

Bunnies, like people, are social beings who crave daily interactions with companions. You may play with Bunny when you're home, but who does he snuggle with while you're at work or asleep? Rabbit couples spend much of their time together: lying side-by-side, pausing for mutual face grooming, or following each other to explore and play. Thirty-five years of house rabbits have convinced me that even my own, thoroughly spoiled rabbits are more relaxed and happy with a second rabbit. Many of our members agree! About half of Wisconsin HRS adoptions are for second rabbits.

### The Basics

The most important key to successful bonding is that both bunnies must be altered. We don't need more bunnies at overloaded shelters! It's not enough to alter just one of the pair. Any male can stimulate false pregnancy in an unspayed female, leading to nest-building and territory issues. An unneutered male is hormonally driven to mount and spray his girl, which will annoy her and ruin your clean house. After surgery, it is best to wait two weeks for males, and four weeks for females, before they start dating. The other keys to success are patience and flexibility. We humans are very particular in the companions we select for ourselves, and so are our bunnies. Indeed, they can be quite stubborn. Rabbits have their own mysterious, wonderful language that is only understood by other rabbits. They seek to fill special needs that we humans are not privy to. They do not share our human biases as to size, appearance, and breed. Rabbits know who they are seeking in a companion, and the human who insists upon "this lop" or "that dwarf" will be likely disappointed. We need to keep as open a mind as our rabbits do.

### The Singles Scene

Many HRS Chapters have "Bunny Dating Services" that find a special "somebun" for your rabbit. Fosterers have a good feel for an adoptable



rabbit's needs and can suggest likely companions based on temperament and interest. Each chapter handles dating differently. Some board your rabbit for several weeks and return a bonded couple to you. Here in Wisconsin and Minnesota, you bring Thumper to the foster home, where we let him have supervised visits with eligible singles, usually of the opposite sex. In general, about ten minutes of interaction will tell us whether the rabbits like each other.

What do we look for in a date? Just like with people, we seldom see "love at first sight." More typically, Thumper and Bugs will ignore each other. They may chase and mount; this is not sexual and instead it is an outlet for their excitement in meeting other rabbits. Other couples seem to ignore each other, but the careful eye reveals radar ears tuned to each others' movements. Some mirror the other's behavior, washing faces or grooming in unison. Rabbits show their dislike for each other by boxing and growling; we immediately separate such rabbits and don't try them again. Overall, first dates seldom last more than fifteen minutes; beyond that, bunnies get stressed and cranky and tend to snap at each other.

### Going Steady

In our experience, Thumper will show interest in one out of three potential companions; this is why it's important to test several candidates. Because dating is stressful, a second date is important to see if "the magic is still there." Second dates are longer, usually 1-1 ½ hours. It is better if the human owner is gone during this date, so that Thumper focuses on the rabbit companion. Rabbits have excellent memories that are based on sight and smell. The two may sniff and touch noses, refreshing their introduction. Chasing or mounting may follow this. They may "flirt" with springs and bounces over each other. Eventually they will "present," placing their noses forward in hopes that the other will begin facial grooming. Grooming is part of the subtle communication between rabbits, and deciding who gets groomed first is of major importance to the rabbits. Bonding will deepen only after this issue is settled. (I should add that once it is settled, it is no longer important and the rabbits spend equal time grooming each other.)



Other indications that a bonding looks good include copycat behaviors or lying stretched and relaxed with the other rabbit present. At the end of the second date, it is clear whether the pairing will succeed.

Post-date, you'll likely have some cleaning-up to do. Often during a bunny date, one or both rabbits will leave poops in the neutral dating arena. Occasionally a bun might also pee to emphasize the message, "This spot is mine. I claim this territory." This type of marking is not cause for alarm. Later, when two bunnies are bonded, they will mark their territory together. Lots of poops in lots of places.

### Moving In

Introducing the new bunny to Thumper's home is done carefully. Rabbits are territorial and may resent an interloper in their domain, even though this stranger was acceptable elsewhere. A second, temporary cage is necessary, and this should be placed no closer than three to six inches away from the first rabbit's cage. (The Madison foster home will loan cages to people adopting a rabbit from us.) Introductions must occur in neutral territory where your rabbit doesn't normally visit, such as a kitchen, bathroom, or bathtub. A slick surface with a rug on top will prevent fast moves and misunderstandings. Remember that stressed rabbits are like young children and are on good behavior only for short times; keep introductions short and always end on a positive note, before tensions rise. Bonding tricks can encourage facial grooming, such as placing the rabbits side-by-side and stroking their cheeks, or putting a dab of Petromalt or water on the forehead.

For stubborn couples, more drastic measures may be necessary. Mutually shared, gentle stress is a good bunny adhesive. Techniques that work include: placing both rabbits in the same transport carrier... during a vigorous car ride; when swung in a slow, gentle arc; or atop a washing machine during its spin cycle. Swap their cages (including litter boxes) every day or two; this acclimates them to the new smell and teaches them that the new



rabbit is not threatening. However, never, ever let a loose rabbit come in contact with the caged rabbit; this encourages aggression and biting through the cage wires. All exercising must be done in a separate room where the rabbits cannot contact each other's cages.

Finally, remember that rabbits are sensitive to human moods. If you are stressed, they will be stressed and may reject their suitor. Some rabbits may be jealous of this new stranger. This situation can be emotionally difficult for you, especially if you are not willing to share your rabbit with his new companion. This means putting some emotional distance between you and your rabbit, temporarily, so that he accepts this new comfort in his life. He won't love you any less; instead, you'll have two rabbits teasing and nudging you, instead of just one.

### Wedding Bells

How do you know when your couple is truly bonded? This is a judgment call that relies on your trust and intuition; after all, you know your bunnies best. Good signs include lots of mutual grooming, lying close together in separate cages, staying together for several hours, or hopping into the other's cage to look for their buddy. I like to "ignore" them in a neutral space, checking (without them seeing me) to see if they get along when unsupervised. This bonding time is highly variable and is unique to each couple and their needs, with an average time of two to three weeks. It is important not to rush them. Accept their natural progression; taking "too long" does no harm. As with people, absence makes a rabbit's heart grow fonder.

*Updated July 2013*