



Anne Martin with the House Rabbit Society uses kissing noises to attract a curious Chester, one of her four adopted bunnies.

SOME BUNNY LOVES YOU

WITH PROPER CARE, A RABBIT CAN BECOME YOUR BEST FRIEND

// BY RUTHANNE JOHNSON

ANYONE VISITING Anne Martin's home in the San Francisco Bay Area would know she has pets. There are the baby gates separating the sun-filled kitchen and breakfast nook from the rest of the house and blocking the entrance to the spare bedroom. The random toys scattered about the house. The water bowls and litter boxes.

But there's no midnight meowing, no whining, no excited yips and yowls when the doorbell chimes. Martin's home is quiet. "Peaceful," she calls it. The only sounds from

Pirka, Chester, Chibi and Juno are the occasional rattle of toys being tossed around and the thump-thump-thump of an itch being scratched.

Martin fell prey to the charms of rabbits nine years ago when she and her partner, Ian Elwood, were searching for a pet. Elwood's cat allergy led them to look at bunnies, and after a little research, they adopted Chibi, a dwarf mix, from a local shelter.

The couple did more research and discovered that rabbits do best with a conge-

nial companion. Back at the shelter, Chibi chose Elliot, a special-needs bunny with cataracts. The experience drew Martin and Elwood into the world of rabbit rescue, and Martin is now executive director of the House Rabbit Society, a California-based nonprofit with chapters across the U.S.

"Rabbits are the third most surrendered pet in the U.S. after cats and dogs," Martin says. "Most are surrendered because a child has lost interest or gone off to college." Others are found as strays, set loose in parks and suburban neighborhoods (Juno was one of 18 domestic rabbits living on a baseball field before they were rescued). Chester came from a laboratory.

"People often get rabbits on a whim," says Alexandra Deckert, HSUS international accounting manager and board member of the Maryland-based Friends of Rabbits. "Then they realize they aren't as easy to take care of as they had imagined."

While it's true that rabbits don't need to be walked or enrolled in obedience classes, that doesn't mean they're low-maintenance. Without proper care or socialization, they can become depressed, ill and destructive.

It's only when rabbits' needs are met that their personalities shine, says Martin. "They can be fun and silly, shy and nervous, or even bossy." Whenever Pirka wants a treat, she stands up and digs at Martin's knee. "It's kind of hysterical that I have this tiny 6-pound rabbit bossing me around for treats."

If you're thinking about adding a rabbit to your household, first do your homework, contact your local shelter or rescue group—and then hop onto the bunny bandwagon.

ROOM TO ROAM: The best place for pets to live is indoors with their human families, and this applies to rabbits, too. Some people let their bunnies roam freely around the house, while others provide cage-free exercise in the mornings and evenings when rabbits are most active. (Keep in mind that rabbits are prolific chewers, so you'll need to protect electrical cords in all bunny-accessible rooms.) Cages should be at least five times the length of the rabbit and tall enough that he can stand on his hind legs

without his ears touching the top. Deckert recommends a minimum of 8 square feet for each rabbit and at least five hours outside the cage each day. Wire floors can injure a rabbit's paws, so look for solid, nonslip flooring. Sivan Fraser with South Florida Rabbit Rescue uses carpeted ramps and gym-flooring squares in her rabbits' enclosures.

BUNNY FOO FOO: If there was a rabbit food pyramid, the base would be timothy hay, followed by leafy greens (no cabbage or iceberg lettuce) and then rabbit pellets—the smallest amount—at the top, says Tim Patino, president of Great Lakes Rabbit Sanctuary in Willis, Michigan. Pellets should be limited to about a quarter cup a day, depending on the size of your bunny. Rabbits have sensitive gastrointestinal tracts, so fresh fruit and treats should be fed sparingly—one Craisin or a “tiny piece of grape, banana or apple” a day, Fraser suggests.

HOPPIN' HEALTHY: Rabbits need regular brushing and nail trimming, and they need things to chew, such as willow or wicker balls, to help wear down their ever-growing teeth. Females have a high risk of ovarian cancer, so spaying is important for their well-being. Spaying or neutering also improves behavior and litter box use, and prevents accidental litters from adding to overpopulation.



Pirka (left) and Chester enjoy checking out their hidey box from all angles. Rabbits are choosy about their friends, but when they find the right bunny companion, they form a strong bond with cuddling and mutual grooming.

THE BUNNY TRAIL: Rabbits like to hop, play and investigate new things in their territory. Martin puts blankets and cat tunnels on the floor for her bunnies to zip through and wicker balls for them to roll around and chew. Sometimes she builds forts from cardboard boxes and adds hay inside. Patino recommends rotating toys for variety.

FRIENDS FOREVER: Rabbits are social but territorial, and they won't bond with just any bunny. Some shelters and rescue groups

hold “speed-dating” events to help single bunnies find that special someone. When Martin was looking for a friend for Pirka, they met 20 bunnies at two shelters before Pirka settled on Chester. The two are now inseparable.

Some dogs and cats can also live harmoniously with rabbit friends. Just introduce them slowly and supervise all interactions.

GENTLE TOUCH: Rabbits are prey animals and need to be approached on their own terms, Fraser says. Most don't like to be picked up but enjoy cuddling and being petted. To win your rabbit's trust, sit quietly on the floor, offer treats and let her approach. If you need to pick up your rabbit, start by gently petting her, Martin advises. Then put one hand under her belly, the other under her bottom, and pull her to you so that all four feet rest vertically on your chest—which will help her “feel nice and secure.”

Rabbits have fragile bodies and become squirmy when nervous. The safest way for a child and rabbit to interact, says Deckert, is to have the child sit on the floor with the rabbit for gentle petting without holding or picking up the bunny.

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