

## Section 7: Keeping Your Rabbits Safe

In this section, we will discuss

- Common rabbit predators
- Rabbit defense and aggressive behavior
- Safety precautions



Elmer Fudd loves to hunt “wascally wabbits” like Bugs Bunny. And, indeed, man is one of the biggest predators of rabbits. Since rabbits are prey animals, low on the food chain, they have a lot of potential predators, especially if they are kept in a hutch outside. Indoor rabbits will go into “guard” mode with any house pets and humans until they get used to their environment. An important part of your rabbit owner responsibility is being aware of potential predators and keeping your pet safe.

### Types of Predators



**In the wild.** When out in the wild, rabbits are on constant alert when outside their burrows and warrens. Predators are a continual threat and can come from the ground, the trees or the skies. Almost any animal that eats meat includes rabbits on its menu. They are relatively small and plentiful, making them a perfect target.

Typical predators include:

- Coyotes
- Foxes
- Wolves
- Raccoons
- Weasels
- Badgers
- Birds of prey such as Owls, Hawks, Buzzards and Eagles

**Pet rabbit predators.** Any of the above-mentioned predators can be just as dangerous to your pet rabbit, especially if you house it outdoors or let it roam without supervision in your fenced yard. As we have mentioned before, never leave your rabbit outside unsupervised because a hawk could carry your furry pet away before you know it. If you keep your rabbit in an outdoor hutch, try to provide extra fortifications to keep out everything from raccoons, to hawks, to your pet dog and even curious neighbors.

**Dogs and Other Pets.** If you have a family dog or cat, think twice about bringing a rabbit into your home. Dogs are natural predators of rabbits, some are bred for hunting. All dogs can be potential dangers, but be espe-



cially careful of breeds in the sporting group (e.g., retrievers, pointers, setters and spaniels) and the hound group (e.g., beagles, dachshund, greyhounds and basset hounds). In Section 3, we discussed ways to introduce your dogs, cats and other rabbits to a new pet rabbit. Until this happens, do not ever leave your rabbit alone with another animal, in the cage or not. If a predator is determine and agile, it can bend cage wires or open cage doors.

In addition, rabbits can have extreme reactions to a possible attack. In its panic to escape, the rabbit can go into shock, have a heart attack or permanently injure itself. This can especially happen to rabbits housed in outdoor hutches that are not brought into a house or barn at night.

## **Defense Tactics**

Fortunately, because of their extreme vulnerability, rabbits have many built-in detection and evasion resources.

**Nose.** We all know that a rabbit twitches its nose almost constantly, even when sleeping. This is partly a permanent alert mode to pick up dangerous scents. In its nose and other locations, rabbits have 100 million receptors to help them smell odors, while humans only have 5 or 6 million.

**Ears.** Those big, funny ears, in addition to helping keep a rabbit warm, provide the rabbit with increased sound waves to detect danger. You may have seen a rabbit move its ears independently, with one facing forward and one backward. This gives them increased hearing ability. Lop-eared bunnies don't have the advantage from upright ears.

**Eyes.** Those large eyes can see almost 360 degrees around them. The only blind spot is directly in front of them, which is why you shouldn't approach your rabbit from the front. They keep a constant lookout for possible danger, periodically raising their head while eating to scan the surrounding area.

In addition to keeping its senses alert, rabbits also have instinctual evasive practices. A rabbit sometimes will dive into surface holes made from prairie dogs and woodchucks for escape and shelter. We've all seen rabbits "freeze" and try to blend into its surroundings. This is a first alert. If the threat comes closer, the rabbit may scurry to a nearby bush or thicket. Speeding away on those long feet is another way to evade danger.

A rabbit will thump one or both hind feet loudly to show distress and/or warn of danger. If a rabbit is cornered, it many thump its pursuer with its hind food to stun the predator enough to allow for a swift exit. In addition, rabbits sometimes make a high-pitched screech when captured, which helps alert other rabbits in the area.

Rabbits run in zigzag patterns to lose a predator and some can jump as high as 12 feet if cornered. A rabbit's kick can be extremely forceful and occasionally a rabbit can break its own backbone with a kick.

Rabbits must be sensitive to sounds, so a pet rabbit may go into a defensive mode upon hearing sudden or loud sounds, such as a jet overhead, music turned up, laughing and loud conversation. The best thing to do for a scared rabbit is make sure it can get swiftly to its cage where it will feel safe.

## **Aggressive Rabbit Behavior**

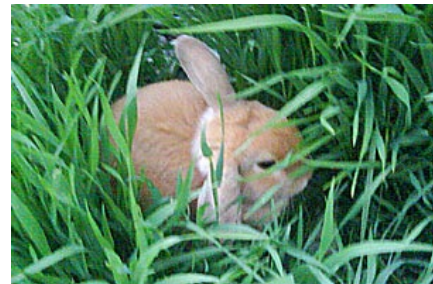
As mentioned, humans are one of the biggest predators of rabbits. So, until your rabbit is accustomed to you and your habits, talk softly, pet less, move slowly, and let rabbits sense you with their eyes, nose and ears. If you happen to scare your rabbit, it may go into aggressive/attack mode. Not good! Look for these signs:

- The rabbit is staring at you intently, standing up and frozen. This is a defense behavior.
- When a rabbit stands with its front legs wide apart, be warned it is angry and will defend itself.
- Rabbits don't talk much, but if you hear snorting or growling, pay attention! This indicates a scared rabbit that may attack.
- Those long ears will lay right down on the rabbit's back, perhaps upside down, when it's ready to charge.
- If your rabbit is thumping its back legs, it is upset and may bite or charge unless you back off.

## **Safety Precautions**

Because your rabbit is a domesticated pet, it is not always able to use all of its defense mechanisms. It is up to you to keep your pet safe. Here are some precautions:

- Keep the rabbit inside, especially at night.
- If the rabbit must stay outside in a hutch, reinforce all sides to prevent predator break-ins.
- Do not pick up your rabbit until it is very used to you and its environment (they become anxious and may bite or kick since this feels to them like a hawk grabbing them).
- Keep pet dogs and cats well away from your rabbit until they have been introduced and trained to live together. Even then, it is best to supervise when both pets are loose.
- Do not ever leave your rabbit outside unsupervised, even within a play pen or run.
- Be sure to latch the cage with the bunny inside when you are not around.
- Be sure your cage is strong enough to withstand a hungry or curious dog or cat.



- To make the rabbits feel safer, do not pick them up out of the cage; let them hop out by themselves.
- Instruct children and guests that the rabbit is not to be picked up and (unless it is extremely well trained) should be left inside its cage.

Wise-cracking Bugs Bunny always outsmarted dull-witted, speech-impaired Elmer Fudd, but in real life, outside of Looney Tunes, not all rabbits can defend themselves at all times, especially if they are domesticated and live in a cage. Take responsibility for your pet through understanding the dangers of predators and house pets, understand how rabbits behave in threatening circumstances, and know the ways to make your rabbit's environment safe.