

Rabbit See, Rabbit Do

Rabbits teach each other behaviors.

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Rabbits Manju and Mochi/Courtesy Anne Sato
Rabbits are social animals and can teach each other behaviors.

If you ask most people which animals they think of as intelligent, they will most likely reply with dogs, dolphins and monkeys. Rarely will they mention the rabbit. Yet those of us who live with rabbits frequently witness just how much they can learn and how they can be taught a range of tricks from fetch to completing a rabbit agility course.

Wild Rabbit Behavior

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Rabbits are also capable of teaching themselves new behaviors, and these are not always what we might have liked them to learn. One of my childhood rabbits, unimaginably named Bunny, learned how to undo the latch on her run and take herself on expeditions around the vegetable patch, much to my amusement and my mother's horror. Even more surprising to me at the time was that Bunny appeared to have taught her son, Nomad, the same trick. Indeed, with a greater understanding of rabbit life and how animals learn how to live in the world, we should not be so surprised at the intelligence of our lagomorph friends.

Rabbits are social creatures that live in groups of two to 14 individuals, and sometimes several such groups share a warren complex, which might have a total population of 100 or more individuals. A group will comprise both male rabbits and female rabbits, although usually more of the latter. The male rabbits have a hierarchical order, with the highest ranking doing most of the breeding. Female rabbits tend to be closely related, because they tend to stay with the group in which they were born. Young male rabbits, on the other hand, tend to be kicked out to make their own way in the world when they reach puberty.

Female rabbits are more tolerant of each other, at least during the autumn and winter. However, they can be aggressive regarding precious resources such as nesting sites, with the most dominant one gaining access to the best sites to rear her litters.

Female rabbits, in general, are more territorial than male rabbits and can be violent in their defense of territory, especially against unknown females. On the other hand, they will let the male strut his stuff and ward off other male rabbits. However, when it comes to arguments between the sexes, it is the ladies that tend to triumph, which is why breeders take the doe to the buck's cage and not the buck to the doe's — where he is likely to get vigorously told off for invading her space.

This group dynamic and knowing one's place in the rabbit society means that each rabbit must be able to recognize and remember who is who. In addition, rabbits also need to have a good memory of the map of their home area: their lives depend on knowing where they are, where a burrow entrance is and the quickest route to it, and thus, safety. Both sets of knowledge will need to be updated frequently as other animals leave or die and as aspects of the environment change (e.g., a new fence).

Although there is little known of rabbit memory, a good idea of what a rabbit might be capable of comes from some recent research on sheep and squirrels, neither of which are usually considered the brightest of beasts. The studies showed that sheep could recognize and remember 50 individual sheep faces for at least two years and grey squirrels can recall 3,000 separate sites where they have buried food in a single season. If this is the case with sheep and squirrels, think of the possibilities with rabbits.

Rabbits can learn by watching others. This is called observational learning, and it has been shown to occur in a wide variety of animals from mice to elephants. Observational learning is when an animal watches what another does and sees, regardless of whether it is beneficial or not.

For example, a pet rabbit could watch its bunny companion seemingly enjoy chewing the sofa and quickly learn to do the same. However, should chewing the sofa result in a loud clap from a non-approving human, then the watching rabbit might decide that this behavior is not one to copy. Observational learning can be particularly useful in teaching a timid

rabbit that humans are quite nice after all, and they can be the providers of yummy treats.

Having a people-friendly rabbit as a model that comes up for a pet on the head and treats can help give confidence to a bunny that is less sure. It is important in this exercise not to rush the timid rabbit and not to make any sudden movements or loud noises. Let the rabbit approach on its own terms to discover the treats lying near you or proffered from your still and open hand, all the while keeping the friendly bunny busy with its own supply of goodies so it doesn't push the other one out of the way.

As rabbits share a common language or communication system, it is understandable that they will take more note of each other than of us humans. For the same reason, rabbits that are well-matched and become good friends are going to be more attached to each other than to you. This should not be taken as a rejection of your love and affection. Rather, consider it a compliment and a privilege to share your home with such a bonded pair, and enjoy watching them interact.

Rabbits that are bonded will sleep, eat and play together. They will greet each other by nudging noses, will lie side-by-side and will groom each other, licking and nibbling each other's fur. Rabbits that are relaxed around their owner will often show these behaviors to each other.