

# Rabbit habits tough to tame

BY DAWN STUART  
CORRESPONDENT

Every year about four to six weeks after Easter, Randy Atkinson starts getting the calls. Someone has spotted a rabbit in the yard or along the road, but it's not a wild brown cottontail — it's a domestic rabbit that someone has "set free."



Cute, yes, but as rabbits mature they sometimes become aggressive.

"They're sitting ducks for predators such as dogs, cats, raccoons and hawks," said Atkinson, who operates Sabrina's House Rabbit ResQ, a Rocky Mount-based rescue group and sanctuary that responds to calls throughout the Triangle.

STAFF PHOTO BY  
TAKAAKI IWABU

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Caitlin Byrd with Pet Mania cleans up rabbit cages at the North Raleigh store. Store owner Jackie Myers encourages people to research rabbit habits before buying them for pets. Many are given as pets around Easter and later abandoned.

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# RABBITS

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If not killed by one of these predators or a car, domestic rabbits often die of starvation, wildlife experts say.

"There is a very strong association with rabbits and the Easter holiday," said Hope Hancock, executive director of the Wake County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. "I think this is not unlike the spike of interest in Dalmatian adoptions when Walt Disney released the '101 Dalmatians' movie."

But rabbit owners don't always realize what they're getting into.

"No animal should be adopted by virtue of a trend," she said. "Taking on an animal without knowing its particular habits and needs is not a wise thing to do."

For Jessica Benefield of Bunny Matters, a rabbit rescue group in North Raleigh, the surge of calls about stray rabbits begins in late May and continues through September. Rabbits are full grown at 6 months old.

"They are no longer tiny and cute like a baby rabbit," Benefield said. "They start having their teenage moments and acting out, and it can be overwhelming for someone who doesn't understand rabbit behavior."

Added Atkinson: "Most rabbits sold at pet shops are about four weeks old. In another four to six weeks, males become sex-

## RABBIT RESCUES

The following organizations will take in stray domestic rabbits:

■ Bunny Matters,  
bunnymatters@nc.rr.com

■ Sabrina's House Rabbit ResQ,  
RabbitResQ@aol.com

■ Wake SPCA, 772-2326

If the rabbit is injured, contact an exotic veterinarian such as:

■ Avian and Exotic Animal Care,  
844-9166

■ Bowman Animal Hospital,  
847-6216

ually mature and start spraying urine to mark their territory. This is when people think they've got a 'bad bunny' and that's when the pet gets put out."

Atkinson has found that most rabbits abandoned within a month or so of Easter are males. "For females, it happens a little later," he said.

Females take another six to eight weeks to reach maturity, at which time destructive behaviors such as digging and chewing and aggressive behaviors such as biting, lunging, circling and growling may increase.

While spaying or neutering a rabbit will curb the worst of these behaviors, some rabbit owners are not willing to pay the \$250 to \$300 cost.

The number of rabbits that are abandoned or surrendered after Easter is difficult to deter-

mine because most shelters that accept rabbits do not keep statistics. However, a 2006 study of local shelters by the Columbus House Rabbit Society in Ohio found a 44 percent increase two to three months after Easter and a 61 percent increase six months after the holiday.

A more humane alternative to releasing a rabbit is surrendering it to a privately operated rescue group or the SPCA. The SPCA of Wake County has agreements with the City of Raleigh and Cary and Garner to accept surrendered animals and strays picked up within the jurisdiction by Animal Control.

"By virtue of our mission, we take all creatures great and small, and we do get a significant number of rabbits," said Hancock.

Make Mine Chocolate, a national campaign run by the Columbus HRS, discourages giving live rabbits as Easter gifts. They recommend alternatives such as stuffed toys, chocolate rabbits or "sponsoring" a rescued rabbit by making a donation to a nonprofit group.

"Kids love stuffed animals," said Terri Cook, vice president of the Columbus nonprofit. "They're cuddly, and they're not living creatures that still need to be cared for after a child loses interest."

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## RABBIT CARE TIPS

Local veterinarians and the House Rabbit Society, a nonprofit group that aims to educate the public on rabbit care, has these recommendations for those who adopt rabbits as pets. For more information, visit [www.rabbit.org](http://www.rabbit.org).

■ Rabbits can live 8 to 10 years or longer when housed indoors. Outdoor housing is not recommended for pet rabbits; outdoor rabbits have an average life span of about one year.

■ Rabbits can be litter box trained. Pine or cedar shavings in the cage or litter box can result in damage to the rabbit's liver and should not be used. A wire-floor cage is not recommended.

■ Adult rabbits should be fed a hay-based pellet (preferably with no added seeds or "treats"), unlimited grass hay such as timothy and a supply of fresh vegetables daily.

■ Rabbits housed in cages need daily exercise in a larger play area.

■ Rabbits naturally dig and chew. Homes with indoor rabbits must be "rabbit-proofed" to prevent chewing electric cords, furniture and rugs.

■ Most rabbits enjoy interaction and caring attention from humans but do not like to be picked up or held. They may bite or scratch when trying to get away. They have fragile skeletons and can be injured easily when handled by a child or inexperienced adult.

■ For health and behavior concerns, rabbits should always be spayed or neutered. Rabbits do not require vaccinations, but annual preventative care visits with a qualified "exotic" veterinarian is recommended.