

Hoppy endings

At Best Friends' Bunny House, there's a risk of cuteness overload

BY CHRISTELLE L. DEL PRETE



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ith its gentle, long-eared, velvet-furred residents, the Bunny House is arguably the cutest place at the Sanctuary. It's a refuge for rabbits — and occasionally

a few guinea pigs — who've been abandoned or injured, who have special needs or who might have come from hoarding situations. Here, bunnies live in safety and comfort while waiting to be adopted. They get lots of love and attention from caregivers, enjoy the companionship of other rabbits, have plenty of toys to play with and fresh veggies to eat, and benefit from expert vet care.



All rabbits at Best Friends are spayed or neutered. Spaying or neutering pet rabbits helps give them the longest life possible, since it makes them less susceptible to certain types of cancer.



A little over half of the bunnies at Best Friends have special needs.

While caring for pet bunnies isn't technically difficult, it does take a little know-how, and the experts at the Bunny House sure know how to keep these furry friends healthy and hoppy. (See what we did there?)

CASTLE FIT FOR A BUNNY

Although people sometimes think of them as backyard pets, domestic bunnies are actually more comfortable living indoors, with access to a safe outdoor area when they choose. The Bunny House has two main areas where its residents live, and between the two buildings, there are 36 spacious rabbit "apartments," each of which has both indoor and outdoor access.

To go outside, the bunnies hop through an angled tunnel that prevents wind and sand from blowing into their indoor space.



The Bunny House has space for just over 100 animals. Most are rabbits, though a few guinea pigs are usually in residence, too.

VOLUNTEER LOVE

► **Ann Raiola**
MIAMI, FLORIDA

I volunteered at the Bunny House and was amazed at how well they are housed and what I learned, such as how to pick them up properly and what you need to know to take care of them.

► **Matt Romagna**
LEXINGTON, MASSACHUSETTS

I love volunteering at the Bunny House. You have to be very gentle and quiet, and if you pet a bunny, you realize they are the softest creatures in the world.

► **Suzie Seagraves**
ORLANDO, FLORIDA

This is one of my favorite animal areas at the Sanctuary. I volunteer with rescue groups back home, and am around dogs, cats, pigs and horses. But I come here to get my bunny fix. Bunnies are snuggly and cute, and people who aren't around them (might not) realize how friendly they are.



In 2017, 34 bunnies and six guinea pigs were adopted from the Bunny House.



The bunnies live in this refuge for as long as it takes for adopters to fall in love with their gentle nature, velvety fur and twitching noses, and ultimately make them their very own.

There's a radiant heating system in the floors for those cool winter nights and, since bunnies are prone to heatstroke, there's also air-conditioning and plenty of protection from the sun for those lazy, hazy days of summer.

The Bunny House has an on-site clinic staffed by a full-time veterinary technician who specializes in rabbits. In the clinic, bunnies with special needs receive specialized medical care, such as laser treatments. The clinic also performs routine medical care, including administering medications and fluids, as well as basic medical exams and grooming. However, when the sweet little tenants need to be spayed or neutered, require other surgeries or X-rays, or have an emergency, they go to the main clinic, which is just down the road.

Some bunnies need physical therapy in addition to their treatment. For them, the Bunny House has large sheltered enclosures protected by predator-proof fencing. The bunnies can hop around in the grass for a little exercise or just enjoy the fresh air and sunshine. Lawn time is rotated so that every bunny who needs it can have his or her turn in the play yard.

FOOD AND FUN FOR BUNNIES

Since bunnies are grazing animals, hay makes up most of their diet. At Best Friends, they also eat high-quality rabbit pellets and greens, such as romaine lettuce or cilantro, every day. Treats such as bananas, carrots and strawberries are given in small amounts once or twice a week and as a reward for bunnies who



Rabbits have three layers of fur and can't regulate their internal temperature. They also like it colder than you might think: Temperatures of 40–50 degrees Fahrenheit are ideal for rabbits. On the flip side, temperatures above 80 degrees Fahrenheit can be dangerous, as bunnies are prone to heatstroke.

are learning new tricks through clicker training. Feeding time is fun not only for the rabbits but also for volunteers, who can pass out greens to eager bunnies and “salads” containing other fruits and veggies to the guinea pigs.

In addition to a balanced diet, bunnies require plenty of enrichment and toys to play with in order to satisfy their instinct to dig and keep their teeth in tip-top shape. Rabbits' teeth are constantly growing, so giving them plenty of chew toys can prevent painful, overgrown teeth and trips to see a veterinarian.

Favorite playthings at the Bunny House include bunny-safe wooden toys and objects like plastic keys — similar to the ones toddlers love. The bunnies also get an endless supply of cardboard boxes to hide in, to lounge on and, yes, even to chew. After Christmas each year, the caregivers collect tinsel-free Christmas trees and recycle them into fun gnawing treats for the bunnies.

A QUIET AND PEACEFUL LIFE

While some rabbits prefer the single life and therefore live alone, most are more content as half of a bonded pair. So, the Bunny House has many pairs of bunnies (and a few trios and foursomes) who are

happiest when together. Some bonded bunnies come to Best Friends together, while others meet at the Sanctuary and become friends through a pairing process that's carefully supervised. (Bunnies can be finicky about who they will accept as a life partner, and rabbits who don't get along can injure each other.) When the match is successful, the tenderness they show as they nuzzle and groom each other is incredibly heartwarming.

Life at the Bunny House is quiet and peaceful. Like horses, bunnies are prey animals, so they are very good at sensing people's energy levels and emotions. Reading to the rabbits — a favorite volunteer activity — is a soothing way to help the bunnies get used to the sound of human voices. It also gives the bunnies a safe space to check out and socialize with their visitors.

At the Bunny House, it's all about making the bunnies feel safe, happy and loved while being on the receiving end of excellent care. The bunnies live in this refuge for as long as it takes for adopters to fall in love with their gentle nature, velvety fur and twitching noses, and ultimately make them their very own. So they can live hoppily ever after. (Look at that. We did it again.) ■