

# Do rabbits need a companion?

An animal behaviourist and a rabbit breeder debate a controversial topic

Eddie Hutchings has been judging for 54 years and writing articles in *Fur & Feathers* since the early sixties. He has held many club positions over the years and was the BRC's President in 1999-2000.



Emma Magnus, BSc MSc is a qualified animal behaviour expert, consultant and journalist who specialises in small animals and who writes regularly for pet magazines and the media. She has been a member of the *Fur & Feather* team since 1995.

## Eddie:

Yes, they do. But not in the way some fluffy bunny lovers keep banging on about!

At this year's Bradford Championship Show I was introduced to the Rabbit Welfare Association's Anne Mitchell who manned a very striking stand, although I thought it rather degraded the showing side by illustrating their recommended way of keeping rabbits, in pairs or groups, housed in a garden shed about 6' x 4' with a large run attached. This certainly isn't how the fancier is recommended to keep his stock, so after a friendly chat Anne and I agreed to disagree.

I have kept rabbits of various types and colours ever since just after the 2nd world war. I was introduced to the showing side in 1948 and the rabbit fancy has been my fulltime hobby ever since. Over the years I have learned so much about rabbits and their behaviour by observing them. This knowledge was gained by the practical route, not by listening to vets or pet bunny experts. My rabbits all have a companion. ME!

I always talk to my stock, I handle them from the age of two weeks old so that by the time they are ready to go out to a show they have no fear of human beings and are happy to be picked up by the judge and stewards.

Now I am retired I am able to spend part of my day with my rabbits. My tip is to keep the radio on all day so they get used to music etc. (My preference is Radio Two, because I can listen to the talk programmes too!)

I get so much pleasure from my rabbits. As soon as I enter the rabbitry I call out to them and they all come straight to the front of their hutches for me to whisper to them as I walk by.

I truly love my animals. There is nothing more relaxing than spending time handling your stock. A good stockman will notice any animal that is showing signs of illness – food left over in the bowls, or loose droppings on the hutch floor. In all my years of breeding rabbits I have only used a vet at odd times, to sign my export licence when sending stock to Canada and the USA. Otherwise, I am the vet.

Rabbits will be your happy companions if you keep them well housed, give them bags of fresh air with plenty of wild greenfood, hay and straw, a top class rabbit mix and clean water.

As for all this talk that rabbits must have another rabbit for company, I am sorry to say that my experience over many many years is that this very rarely works. Recently I had two Opal Rex sisters running together; they were fine up to four months old then one morning I found that they had been fighting and one was so badly injured that I could only do the kindest thing. I have managed to nurse the other one back to full health but her beautiful coat is ruined for showing.

So please, you so-called experts, please do not keep plugging this two-in-a-hutch nonsense or I will scream!



## Emma:

Rabbits occasionally fight. Before I start I think we all need to accept that this is something that they do and it is a perfectly natural behaviour.

However, rabbits are also highly social animals and, if they are not being used for breeding, should have the opportunity to interact with other members of their own species.

If we had a dog – another sociable species – and left it alone all day when we were at work, we would either come home at lunchtime or get a companion dog. Why should rabbits be treated any differently?

All too often I hear the assumption made that rabbits cannot live together, but how can that be true?

Would they really have evolved as such a successful wild animal if they had no interest in each other? How would they manage to dig their large underground homes on their own? How long would they live without the eyes and ears of the whole group to help spot predators?

Of course, the counter argument to all this is that we provide their protection and we keep them in hutches that we have built ourselves – unfortunately that does not mean we can change the biology of the animal.

Given the opportunity, and the right environment, the majority of rabbits will develop stable relationships with other rabbits and there will be little or no fighting long-term.

Neutering markedly increases the chances of successful pairings. An ideal pairing is a male and female – either castrated/spayed as early as possible if litter mates or before introduction if unrelated.

A pair of castrated males can live together quite happily, especially if they are brothers.

Unfortunately the highly territorial nature of females means that the majority of females will not tolerate another female long-term, even if both are neutered.

Successful pairings also rely on other factors – mostly environmental. The larger the area and the more complex the environment (i.e. things to climb on, hide under or go into) the more likely the rabbits will bond and live happily.

The more feed bowls and water bottles (litter trays, if appropriate) the less chance there will be of competition.

If the rabbits are initially introduced during the colder (non-breeding) months then there is a greater chance of success.

Of course, personalities also come into play and we can't be expected to like everyone, and nor should our rabbits – but that doesn't mean we should try it once, give up and tell prospective pet rabbit owners that their rabbit has to be kept alone.

