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Lisa Hutcheon of the Small Animal Rescue Society snuggles with 18-pound Honey Bunny, a Flemish giant rabbit available for adoption at the BC SPCA's Vancouver Branch. Rabbits make great pets — for the right guardian.
CORY ANDERSON-FENNELL — FOR THE PROVINCE

Pet rabbits should keep you hopping

House-trained easily, caregiver home evenings

BY CORY ANDERSON-FENNELL
SPECIAL TO THE PROVINCE

Honey Bunny the rabbit is bigger than all of the cats at the BC SPCA's animal shelter in Vancouver.

At eight kilograms this hulking hare even dwarfs some of the dogs.

"She's a big girl with big personality," says branch manager Ryan Voutilainen. "She's docile and friendly, and she'll even tolerate sitting in your lap, as long as your lap is big enough for her."

A Flemish Giant, Honey Bunny is so big that she doesn't fit in the shelter's standard rabbit kennels, so she either runs around loose in the bunny room or lounges in a dog kennel retrofitted especially for her.

So what's an extra-large lagomorph like Honey Bunny doing in a shelter?

"The rabbits we see here are usually the result of people being unprepared for how much care they require," says Voutilainen. "Once they realize rabbits aren't

so-called starter pets and that they can live up to 12 years, they drop them off at a shelter, call a rescue group or set them loose outdoors, the latter of which is totally illegal."

Between SPCA shelters and other animal rescue groups, there are hundreds of former pet rabbits in care across the province. The Burnaby-based Small Animal Rescue Society alone has more than 250 homeless hoppers.

"Rabbits can make wonderful pets," says SARS spokeswoman Lisa Hutcheon, "but only with a well-matched guardian who understands what caring for a rabbit entails."

Rabbits tend to sleep during the day, so they are best suited to working adults who are home in the evenings to interact with them, says Hutcheon.

They should be housed indoors and that means guardians must rabbit-proof their home. This includes concealing exposed electrical cords and providing enough safe, chewable toys so the rabbit won't be tempted to chew on other items, such as furniture and books.

Like cats, rabbits can easily be trained to use a litter box, which means they can be free-roaming rather than caged.

Hutcheon says pet rabbits should also be spayed or neutered to prevent unwanted litters and reduce territorial aggression.

"If a bunny is unsprayed or unneutered, when it hits puberty the hormones kick in and their behaviour and personality are unpredictable," says Hutcheon.

Fixed rabbits can live with other rabbits of the same or opposite sex, provided their personalities are well-matched.

For their diet, rabbits thrive on hay, fresh vegetables, pellets purchased from pet-supply stores and water.

Lastly, Hutcheon says it's important to find a veterinarian who specializes in small animals.

"Rabbits are prey animals, so they hide it when they don't feel well to avoid appearing weak. It's up to a perceptive guardian and an experienced veterinarian to know when special care is required. That's another reason rabbits should be housed indoors — so you'll notice these telling changes."

To find out more about pet rabbits visit spca.bc.ca, smallanimalrescue.org or rabbit.org.

Anderson-Fennell is communications officer for the BC SPCA
cfennell@spca.bc.ca