



A More Perfect Union

Matchmakers help rabbits find that special someone

by ARNA COHEN

Chasing, hair pulling, and rump sniffing aren't the usual activities at a singles event, but tonight, they're *de rigueur*. This event is for rabbits, and the attendees are speaking the language of bunny love.

The most eligible bachelor among the crowd is a young albino rabbit named Jake, who will have a first date with his future honey buns—three rabbits who have lived together happily for several months. Their owners want to add Jake to the mix and have left the trio at the Columbia, Md., home of Susan Wong for the introductions. As director of the Washington, D.C.-area rescue group Friends of Rabbits, Wong is an experienced matchmaker.

Like humans, domestic rabbits thrive in the company of their own kind. A singleton bunny may love you unconditionally,

but her life will be much more fulfilling if she has a friend to groom, snuggle, and play with. Rabbits can form such strong bonds with one another that when one dies, the survivor visibly grieves.

But not just any friend will do. Rabbits are as picky as humans, and the wrong combination can lead to an unhappy marriage. Only the rabbits know for sure the magic ingredients to a successful relationship, but to their credit, they don't care about looks or age. "A lot of people who are adopting a second rabbit make the mistake of picking the one that's the cutest or matches the first one—the same size, the same color, the same breed," says Adam Goldfarb, director of The HSUS's Pets at Risk program and resident rabbit expert. "Those things are really unimportant. You want to find the

best match for your rabbit's personality."

The easiest way to start your bunny family is to adopt two who have already bonded. But if you have a lone rabbit in need of a companion, a dating service is the way to go. Such programs consist of rescue group "match days," when owners bring their animals to a foster parent's house to meet adoptable rabbits. (If you adopted from a shelter, a local rescue group may do the introductions for you, often free of charge or for a small donation.)

During these speed-dating rounds, a bunny spends several minutes alone with each rabbit until he decides which one he wants to take home. The date at Wong's house was a bit different from the standard. Jake, the bachelor bunny, was chosen by the human family, not by their rabbits; though not ideal, such arranged marriages work out most of the time, says Wong: "It just takes a little more effort when they don't get to pick their friends."

Either way, introductions should take place in a neutral space, advises Margo DeMello, president of the House Rabbit Society, a rescue organization. "Rabbits are super territorial. In the wild, they would never allow strange rabbits into their space, which means we have to set things up artificially so that [the bonding] is more likely to succeed." Having the rabbits meet away from their home turf lessens the chance of fighting and encourages attachment. It's also essential that the rabbits be spayed or neutered; raging hormones can drastically interfere with the dating process.

Wong's dating service helped Barbara Henderson find a companion for Fiver, a 4-year-old neutered male. "I had him for about two years as a single rabbit, and he seemed fine with that," says Henderson, an HSUS shelter services coordinator. "Then he chewed a huge hole in the wall and started head butting the cats. I think he really wanted a playmate."

Male-female pairings generally have a greater success rate, so Fiver first met several females. But he ignored the girls and was drawn to Snowball, an older male rabbit twice his size. Within minutes, they were grooming each other.

Not all introductions go so smoothly. Unfamiliar rabbits often chase and mount each other, pull fur, and thump their feet—it's their way of establishing a pecking order and learning to speak the other's language. This behavior usually subsides as the animals grow more comfortable. Brief spat is also normal, but matchmakers watch for serious signs of aggression: flattened ears, raised tails, arched backs. If vicious fighting—including biting and "boxing"—breaks out, the rabbits are separated immediately, and a different candidate is brought in.

Fiver and Snowball were a more amiable duo, but they didn't go home immediately. The next step was the "bunnymoon," a bonding period that can last a few days to a few weeks. The two shared a pen for several days, with Wong closely supervising for signs of discord.

Wong typically starts introductions on a Friday night so she has the weekend to work with a new pair. "I'll stay up all night if I need to," she says. If they start fighting, she'll put them in a carrier and take them for a spin in the car. "They're both scared



Susan Wong

and rely on each other for comfort." A couple of car rides is usually all it takes for an indecisive couple to take the plunge.

This step was unnecessary for Fiver and Snowball (renamed Rorschach). Now at home, Fiver has become extremely protective of his companion. "If one of the other animals gets too close, Fiver attacks them," Henderson says. "He's pulled fur out of the cats. Rorschach just watches and hops away." As for Jake, Wong reports that less than 24 hours after their introduction, he was inseparable from his new sweethearts.

Once a bunny bond is forged, almost nothing will break it apart. Not every couple will groom each other or cuddle, and some may even bicker, but as DeMello notes, "it's very rare for two rabbits not to get along in some way." Occasionally an external stressor can touch off fighting. This was the case with Squirt, Inkling, and Princeton, peaceful housemates who started skirmishing after their humans had a baby. But a short stay at Wong's house for some reinforcement and renewal of vows was all that was needed to restore harmony to the household.

Recipe for Bunny Bliss

You've wisely left the matchmaking to the experts. Follow these tips for ensuring happiness post-introduction.

- ▶ If you already have a rabbit and you're planning to adopt another, make your home neutral territory to head off discord. Clean areas your rabbit has occupied with vinegar to remove his scent, and use new bedding and toys in the cage or pen.
- ▶ Try to bring new rabbit companions home when you'll be around for a few days so you can monitor their interaction. Be prepared to intervene with a gentle blast from a squirt gun if you notice any tension, and wear heavy gloves for your protection.
- ▶ If the bunnies are having trouble adjusting, you may need to set them up in side-by-side pens for a while so they can get used to each other's presence without injury. Or they may need to go back to the matchmaker's house for a short stay. Call the rescue group for advice.

➔ **WEB EXTRA:** Check out The HSUS's new video on rabbit care at humanesociety.org/magazine.

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