

When Delight Turns to Reality, It's Goodbye, Easter Bunny

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APRIL 19, 2014

Photo



Anne Martin and Milo, a rabbit she rescued from a shelter, at the offices of the House Rabbit Society in Richmond, Calif. Credit Jim Wilson/The New York Times

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RICHMOND, Calif. — Back in 1988, when the seven founders of the [House Rabbit Society](#) first came together at a dining table in Alameda, Calif., just south of here, the idea of keeping a rabbit as an indoor pet was considered fairly smirk-worthy.

Yet the group was able to incorporate as a nonprofit, dedicating itself to promoting responsible rabbit ownership, matching abandoned rabbits with bunny-loving foster caretakers and ultimately setting up perhaps the first rabbits-only adoption center at its headquarters here. Now with chapters in dozens of states, the society boasts of having hosted the first veterinary conference focused exclusively on rabbit health and having saved tens of thousands of rabbits from [euthanasia](#). Its slogan: “Buy a Bunny a Little Time.”

But Easter, of course, is a trying time for the group, given the tradition of presenting baby rabbits to children as holiday gifts. Delight soon turns to woe as the family discovers what the organization has been saying for decades: Rabbits require as much care and maintenance as dogs, and — as heart-meltingly cute and cuddly as they can be —

they must be litter-box trained and spayed or neutered to be effective house pets.

Photo



Harper Rower with one of her three rabbits she and her parents brought to the offices for grooming.
Credit Jim Wilson/The New York Times

“If rabbits are given as a gift for Easter without a lot of education, they’re going to end up giving it away a few months later — it’s a no-brainer,” said Margo DeMello, president of the House Rabbit Society.

In 2002, the group’s Columbus, Ohio, chapter developed a public service campaign — [“Make Mine Chocolate!”](#) — to discourage people from taking home rabbits for Easter. The effort is a work in progress, though: Only dogs and cats end up at animal shelters more often than rabbits. More than 1,000 are taken to shelters in the San Francisco Bay Area each year, according to the House Rabbit Society.

Tim Wilson, an owner of Wilson’s Feed & Supply in Napa, Calif., has stopped selling rabbits for several weeks before Easter.

“People want them for the day,” he said. “Too many years, we opened up after Easter and there were boxes on the sidewalk with ducks, chicks and rabbits.”

Because of the abandonment problem, many states ban giving away rabbits as prizes at carnivals and other events. San Francisco, Los Angeles and several other cities have outlawed the sale of rabbits at pet stores. And in 2008, Petco, the giant pet store chain, decided to stop selling rabbits in its shops.

Even so, a wave of unwanted rabbits begins arriving at animal shelters just days after the holiday, once children lose interest. A second wave comes a few months later once the rabbits hit puberty: At that point, the male rabbits spray urine everywhere, while females grow territorial.

And because determining a young rabbit’s sex is difficult, owners who thought they had two female rabbits can suddenly find themselves with litter after litter of bunnies. While the problem can be fixed, many parents who plucked rabbits from a pet shop window days before the holiday are not prepared to spend up to \$300 to spay or neuter a

rabbit they bought for \$30. Others are jarred to learn only after they bought a rabbit that it could live more than a decade.

On Friday, members of the House Rabbit Society in the Bay Area picked up two rabbits that had been scheduled for euthanasia at local shelters. The shelter here in Richmond can house up to 40 rabbits, and sometimes it reaches capacity. Even so, adoptions are not generally permitted right before Easter, an effort to keep people from making impulse decisions.

“If they really want a rabbit, they’re still going to want it after the holiday,” said Anne Martin, chief executive of the House Rabbit Society.

But Julie Dinsdale, who was adopting a rabbit with her partner, Heather, and daughter, Laura, was allowed to pick up their new rabbit on Friday. They already owned another rabbit and were looking for a companion.

A veterinary technician, Ms. Dinsdale, 34, said she had found three rabbits left in shopping carts outside her workplace over the last several years.

“We see a lot of the downside of whimsical pet buying,” she said. “When I hear people say, ‘Oh, we’ll get them as a present,’ I say, ‘Don’t do it.’ It doesn’t give them a chance to really consider the responsibility.”

Among those parents caught up in the whimsy was Wylie Dold. When his daughter Whitney was 4, she won a pet rabbit at his company’s Easter egg hunt on the outskirts of Houston.

Whitney was thrilled — at first — but quickly lost interest. The red-eyed white rabbit would wriggle out through the fence, eat the neighbor’s grass and leave droppings all over the house and the porch.

“I was totally in the moment,” Mr. Dold, now 68, said of spotting the winning golden Easter egg and gladly accepting the prize rabbit. “Looking back on it, it’s hard to believe I wasn’t concerned with the downside.”

The family took Snowball back to the next year’s Easter party. Mr. Dold put a half-joking sign on its cage: “Free bunny to good home or recipe.”