

Caring for Rascal, a Physically-Challenged House Rabbit

July, 2001

Lyn Samp
Westwood, Massachusetts

Forward by Greg Mertz, DVM



While Rascal exhibits an exceptionally positive attitude in the face of great odds, his situation nevertheless represents the future of pet care. With appropriate guardianship, exotic pets, akin to their cat, dog and human counterparts are living much longer. This longevity however, leads to geriatric health challenges: Rascal struggles with dehydration, weight loss, paralysis, epilepsy, fur mites, cataracts, infection, arthritis and cardiac stress. On the upbeat side, increased show of affection is not uncommon in older, vulnerable animals. Extended years of familiarity clearly benefits communication and solidarity between companion pet and caretaker, avoiding a rush to euthanize. Lyn and John show that through love and creative adaptations, seeing Rascal through his difficulties has enriched all three of their lives.

BACKGROUND

Rascal stood out as the friendliest, most inquisitive baby bunny in his litter. He has always been an intelligent, affectionate companion who, now in his senior years, continues to adapt.

Rascal made it clear from day one that he would not tolerate confinement. He quickly learned to *almost always* use his litter box, so my husband John and I gave him as much freedom as he could handle at various stages of his development. For nearly all of his ten years he has had total run of the house, of the car (minus the driver's area), and of most of the places he has visited. He has traveled to eighteen states and three provinces, staying in dorms, hotels, and in many private homes. Rascal also loves to visit my classroom, and is affectionately known to students all over the greater Boston area.

Before his stroke, Rascal chose his own snacks by begging at the appropriate location, hopped around to find a room in which to relax, nudged us when he wanted affection, and stood at the door when he wanted to go outside. He recognized luggage and threw temper tantrums when he was left at home, then greeted us joyfully when we returned. He rushed to our side when he was concerned for our welfare. He also found ways to live up to his name...



Rascal was caught distributing recyclables and tossing beer cans about the kitchen.



He used to steal kale out of the fridge. The rug prevented him from slipping in his later years.



Rascal often eluded me by hiding in men's rooms. Here he is exposed at the VFW Hall in Swampscott, Mass.

PARALYSIS

I came home from work in March of 2000 to find Rascal frantically struggling to hop. He was frightened, but seemingly not in pain. We learned from Dr. Greg Mertz that Rascal had the snuffles (a respiratory infection), and probably had suffered a stroke. There was little chance of recovery from the stroke, and the snuffles would be

chronic as well. Our challenge was to “maintain” him – make him as comfortable as possible. That was sixteen months ago.

Rascal can no longer groom himself adequately, use his litter box, drink water or eat out of his dish. We can never again leave him for any extended period of time. In addition to our concern for Rascal’s well-being, we have made a multitude of minor adjustments and sacrifices for our beloved bunny.

COMFORT

Rascal is partially paralyzed in his right hind and left front legs. He always lies on his right side, so that his squirming results in backward movement in a clockwise direction. For the first few months of his disability, he would often drag himself off his bedding, into a wall or under a chair in the next room. There he would remain stuck until we freed him. If he boxed himself in at the wrong time, he could languish there for hours. I came home from work in the middle of the day whenever my schedule allowed it. Rascal would softly squeal his appreciation when finally rescued. Eventually he learned to, or weakened enough to remain on or near his bed.

Rascal has two beds, one with a piece of egg crate foam under a folded white towel, the other with a sheep-skin rug underneath. An Astro-Turf® mat further underlies the rug. Using white towels makes it easy for us to discern cleanliness. The two bed set-up gives him a change of cushioning and view, and allows us to transfer him readily when the towel becomes soiled. There is always a clean bed waiting...we shift him, shake out the dirty towel, toss it into the laundry, then replace it with a clean one. We change towels about three times daily and launder a “Rascal load” two to three times per week.



The rolled towels both protect him from draft, and guide him to stay on his towel.



More than ever, Rascal loves being held, partly because he is bored and sore from staying in the same position for so long. Holding him relieves the relentless pressure on his right side. Additionally, he simply adores the attention. Since his stroke, Rascal’s show of affection has increased a great deal, a remarkable benefit of an otherwise unfortunate condition.

Rascal and John cuddling after a bath. – I’m not sure who enjoys it more.

FEEDING

While Rascal’s appetite remains healthy, he loses weight rapidly when food is inaccessible. We food-load him in the mornings and evenings, when he may go for nine hours without eating or drinking. We feed him whenever possible by placing pellets and snacks within his reach. His tendency is to push away from his food, causing much frustration. He still begs for treats, although his method has evolved to kicking, lifting his head and grunting. Shortly after his stroke, he began making sounds to communicate, empowering him to call us even from an adjacent room.

For dry food, we give him LM Bounti-buffet® mixed with Kaytee Rainbow Exact Diet® and regular bunny pellets. His preferred snacks have always been kale, banana and granola: now he has added clementines, carrots,

TRAVELING BUNNY

After Rascal's stroke we left him with a friend so we could fly to California. Although he received excellent, comprehensive care, he lost so much weight that we now limit ourselves to car travel. In the past year Rascal has accompanied us on nine journeys, staying in hotels, private homes, a dorm, a campground, and a bunkhouse. Although he prefers being held, he is safer in his Moses basket (see photo) on the back seat. We use a portable sunshade or position the basket hood to block direct sunlight. We keep spare diapers and towels in the car, along with a cooler for fresh food. Non-perishable food is easily accessed from a backpack kept on the floor behind the passenger. Its outside pocket stores Rascal's medications and related items.

In April we faced the choice of skipping our camping trip to Florida vs. taking Rascal with us. Although the 3000 mile long ride was stressful for him, the camping and beach-going experiences were quite manageable:



Administering medications at the campground was more cumbersome than usual.



The Moses basket (\$25) was useful for transportation and for passing Rascal off as a baby at places where animals weren't appreciated.



John bathes Rascal in his travel tub at the campground. Oscar Scherer State Park officials wouldn't allow us to stay at a campsite near the river, for fear that alligators would pick up Rascal's scent.



For two nights the temperature dipped into the 40's, so Rascal warmed John in his sleeping bag.

ACCESSORIZING RASCAL

Medications

- ❑ mortar and pestle (kitchen store)
- ❑ syringes...various sizes (veterinarian)
- ❑ papaya enzyme (health food store)
- ❑ Vibramycin®, Baytril®, Panalog®, Terramycin®, (veterinarian)
- ❑ Miticide for Cats & Kittens® (Wal-Mart)

Bedding

- ❑ egg crate foam pad, cut to size (discount department store)
- ❑ ~16 white towels (Costco)
- ❑ Astro-Turf®-type mat (discount dept. store)
- ❑ 2 machine-washable faux sheepskin rugs, 2' X 4' (discount department store)
- ❑ Moses basket

Grooming and Hygiene

- ❑ paper towels by the case
- ❑ cloth diapers
- ❑ baby bibs
- ❑ baby wash cloths
- ❑ baby brush and comb
- ❑ Bunny Bath® (pet store) or Johnson's baby moisturizing shampoo
- ❑ wash tub for travel

CONCLUSION

As long as Rascal is content, his value to us and his right to live far outweigh the inconveniences. We are prepared to euthanize if he begins to suffer too much, or perhaps he will die peacefully at home instead. Until then, though, caring for Rascal in his time of need deepens our bond. He remains a free spirit, loving and grateful.

.~.~.~.~.~.~.~.~.~.~.~.~.

“What a lovely bunny – and he looks utterly contented when you and John give the attention that any animal would love,” Mary Samp, Rascal's unbiased “grandparent” October, 2000

“...the happiest paraplegic rabbit in the world” Greg Mertz, DVM December, 2000

.~.~.~.~.~.~.~.~.~.~.~.~.

I wish to thank veterinarians Greg Mertz and Flavia Zorghiatti for their professional insight in caring for Rascal. The House Rabbit Society, www.rabbit.org, also provided me with several ideas. Much of my learning has come from trial and error, and many of the successes can be attributed to Rascal himself - his spunk and his adaptability. I may be reached at lsamp@dedham.mec.edu for questions or comments.

2002 UPDATE

Rascal thrived as an invalid for nearly two years. In late February, he suffered a major seizure from which he would not recover. On March sixth, after his bath and affectionate to the end, Rascal quietly passed away in John's arms.

RASCAL SAMP

9/7/91 – 3/6/02

copyright © 2001, 2002 Lynda Samp

Permission is granted to copy all or part of this document for non-commercial use