

Netherland Dwarf Rabbits

The Gem of The Fancy

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The American Rabbit Breeders Association recognizes over 45 different breeds of rabbits, the smallest is the very popular Netherland Dwarf. This diminutive breed weighs in at an ideal show weight of only 2 Lb. and boasts over 24 different color varieties, the most of any breed. This dwarf breed has a very distinctive look, the show standard calls for a large rounded head, bold eyes, topped off with small well furred ears on a short compact body. The shoulders and hips should be of equal width and the body should have good depth over the top. The fur of the dwarf is soft and dense which produces a rollback quality. They have good temperaments and are very curious creatures who also enjoy interaction with their owners. The Netherland Dwarf is one of the most popular breeds and their small size makes them an ideal pet.

Rabbit Shows:

It is surprising to many people that there are rabbit shows. Shows are great places to meet other breeders, socialize, pick up rabbit supplies, and of course enjoy friendly competition. ARBA is the organization responsible for defining show rules, training and licensing judges, registering rabbits, and maintaining the Standards by which each breed is judged. They also have a system for registering rabbits that meet the breed standard and are free of disqualification's at the time of registration. A rabbit that is registered and meets additional show success criteria is awarded a Grand Champion certificate.

Netherland Dwarfs are divided into 5 color groups, Self, Shaded, Agouti, Tan Pattern, and AOV (any other variety) and judged according to their breed standard. Dwarfs are known as a 4 class breed. During judging each color variety is divided into four classes, senior buck, senior doe, junior buck, and junior doe. The first place animals then compete against the others of a color to pick Best and Best Opposite Sex of Variety. The BOV and BOSV winners within a color group then compete for Best and Best Opposite Group. The Best of Breed and Best Opposite Sex of Breed winners are chosen from among the group winners. Finally the BOB winner can go on to compete against other breed winners for Best 4 Class and Best in Show.

History:

The Netherland dwarf 's origins go back to the early 1880's in England. Some litters of Dutch rabbits had mutations, white colored kits with red eyes, a short cobby body similar to a Dutch, and a soft coat. They were given the name "Polish". These mutations were able to reproduce and through careful line breeding more of these red eyed white rabbits appeared. The new breed was first exhibited in 1884 in Hull, England and were exported to Germany.

Their arrival in Germany brought great excitement and a standard was created which was similar to our current dwarf standard. The white rabbits were crossed with small wild rabbits to improve the type which also resulted in agouti colored rabbits. The next generation resulted in black colors and finally the whites reappeared. Mr Otto Lippolt was given credit for perfecting the breed, now known as "Hermelin". They were becoming very popular in Germany and some were exported to Holland.

Until the late 1930's color choice was limited to Blue-eyed whites and Red eyed whites. At this time the Dutch fancier Jan Meyering and some close associates began crossing the REWs with other breeds to get different colored dwarfs. After years of careful breeding colored dwarfs appeared that resembled our present day animals and were given a standard in 1940.

After the second world war the Netherland Dwarf arrived in England. Some English Rex fanciers visited Holland to help the Dutch fancier's whose rabbitries had become non-existent or depleted due to German occupation. This was 1947 and the English first saw and fell in love with the dwarf at an exhibition in Amsterdam. They wanted some to take home, however at this point only 17 dwarfs had survived the occupation. Finally in 1949 Joyce Naylor and some other fanciers were able to get a hold of 9 of these precious gems. On October 13, 1949 these fanciers formed the Netherland Dwarf Club in England. Popularity grew quickly and in 1950 the British Rabbit Council gave them official recognition. A total of 18 rabbits were entered in their first dwarf show at New Malden in Surrey.

Netherlands come to the US:

As early as 1965 Netherland Dwarfs were exported from England to the US by fanciers to improve the Polish breed. In 1969 Darrell Bramhall met with English fancier Jack Turnbull and began a life long interest in Netherland Dwarfs. Mr. Bramhall bought some dwarfs from Mr Turnbull, a pair of himmies. Mr Bramhall suggested that they form a specialty club to promote and encourage the breeding and showing of Netherland Dwarfs in the US. He also began work on a standard for dwarfs to be accepted by the ARBA. The English standard formed the basis and a few minor changes were made. The standard was presented to ARBA at the 1969 convention in Calgary Canada. At this show there were a total of 6 dwarfs shown by 2 exhibitors. A lot of interest was generated at the convention and ARBA accepted the proposed standard.

The American Netherland Dwarf Rabbit Club, the proposed specialty club for dwarfs, was granted an ARBA charter on Jan. 15, 1970. At the 1970 ARBA convention in Syracuse NY the number of dwarfs exhibited dramatically rose to 85 from 6 the previous year. The following year the ANDRC held it's first National show at Montpelier, Ohio, with eighty-five dwarfs shown by 26 exhibitors. During this time a club newsletter called Netherland News was created.

Membership saw rapid growth during this time to 550 members in 1973 and over 1200 by the end of 1974. The newsletter name was changed to Dwarf Digest. Today the ANDRC is considered one of the best and largest specialty clubs in ARBA and offers many services to it's membership. The Dwarf Digest and club guidebook offer invaluable information to both new breeders and old timers. The ANDRC also has a scholarship program for youth members.

In 1984 at the ARBA convention in Orlando, FL, Ruth Terna of Hawaii won Best Fancy (Best 4 Class) with a REW senior doe. This was a first for a dwarf in open competition at an ARBA convention. In 1988 a new color was accepted, the otter variety, this color was sponsored by Les Everett.

At ARBA conventions Netherland Dwarfs are among the largest entries. At the Louisville, KY 1995 convention 1,602 dwarfs were entered. ANDRC membership now stands around 2,250 and there are almost 1,800 dwarf shows sanctioned each year. The popularity of dwarfs are still increasing, they are now being raised in every rabbit raising nation of the world!

Proper Care for Netherland Dwarfs:

Despite being a small breed Netherland Dwarfs are very hardy. They can be housed indoors or out even in winter. When housed outdoors care should be given to protect the rabbits from predators, both four and two legged. The hutch should provide protection from drafts and wetness in winter and be placed in shade during summer. Of course many pet owners prefer them inside to spend time interacting with their pets. A dwarf needs a cage at least 18"x24" and 12" high, most owners prefer a wire bottom cage so

droppings fall through. They can be trained to use a litterbox which makes them an ideal house pet. The owner must take care to bunny-proof any rooms their rabbit will be allowed loose in. They love to chew cords so any electrical, phone, or computer wires must be concealed or protected. A rabbit should also be watched when allowed free run of the house so they don't try and chew furniture, baseboards, or walls. Chewing and digging are normal rabbit behaviors and instead of discouraging it you should work to redirect it to acceptable chew toys and digging spots. This can be accomplished by spraying the rabbit with water and shouting no when he misbehaves. In order to properly train a rabbit the owner must have patience and commitment.

Pet owners receive much pleasure interacting with their pet rabbits. Most people do not realize the amount of communication and affection a pet rabbit is capable of. For example a rabbit will often use their teeth as a form of communication. A gentle nip can mean pet me while a hard bite is telling the owner bunny has had enough. They will often use their nose to nudge and push you, again it may mean they need attention or that you are in the way. Other rabbit body language can include circling (a sign of affection or mating behavior), licking (bunny kisses), or the most entertaining of all hops and sprints to express joy. These bunny hops are often performed at the end of a sprint, sometimes they leap straight up and other times up and to the side. It is hard to miss the look of happiness that appears on the rabbit's face when performing this stunt. Many owners have rabbits that enjoy cuddling with them and demand lots of pets, however some rabbits tend to be "loners" or shy and prefer less obvious displays of affection. Each one has their own individual personality so the owner must learn how best to bond with their rabbit. A rabbit owner should also be aware that rabbits thump their hind feet to signal danger so it is best to refrain from using thumping or banging to get bunny's attention, unless it is to tell them to stop.

One must also be careful when handling a rabbit. If you do not support their hind end when lifting they think they will fall, become scared, and will struggle. A rabbit has a very fragile spine and rough handling can cause a break. Children under 7 years of age are not good candidates for pet rabbit owners, their energetic behavior can often scare or injure a rabbit. A rabbit's powerful hind feet can also cause deep scratches if they are handled improperly. Frequent and gentle handling will make your pet docile and unafraid. Speaking softly helps the rabbit bond with you and some will even respond to their names.

Rabbits will also exhibit undesirable behavior that will make the owner unhappy but are natural for bunny. Some of these include sexually motivated behaviors such as urine spraying, aggression, digging, and mounting. Litterbox habits may also suffer because droppings are used to mark territory. Some does will also go through false pregnancies and dig nests and pull fur as well as become very aggressive. Usually spaying or neutering will prevent these behaviors or lessen them. Altered rabbits are also easier to find companions for without the fear of unwanted litters and less fighting between newly introduced pairs. Rabbits can bond with another but be advised that in many cases it takes time and intervention during fights. Rabbits can also live happily with other household pets including the family cat and dog. Again caution must be exercised when introducing other animals. Obedience training is also a necessary requirement.

A very important aspect of rabbit care is proper diet. Many owners unintentionally fail at this point and that often spells disaster for their pet. Netherland Dwarfs have a digestive system even more sensitive than most breeds. The best diet consists of fresh, good quality rabbit pellets fed in limited amounts. It is crucial that the pellets be fresh and stored for no longer than eight weeks, do not use pellets which are moldy or have been contaminated. As pellets age they lose important nutrients and a rabbit's system will become susceptible to disease. The owner should also be checking the label for the percentages of protein, fiber, and fat. The National Research Council lists minimum rabbit nutrient requirements for a maintenance diet as 14% crude fiber, 2% fat, and 12% protein. It is best to feed a pellet that is higher in fiber (18-20%) and lower in protein (14-15%) and fat (2-3%) to a pet rabbit. Once you find a good brand stick with it, frequent changes in diet can cause digestive problems. If you need to change brands be sure to mix the new feed in with the old and increase the amount of new to old over a weeks time so the rabbit can adjust.

The next important step is to feed the pellet in limited quantities. The cause of many diet problems in pet rabbits is the overfeeding of pellets which lead to obesity and greater incidence of disease. The average

dwarf should be fed 2-3oz. of pellet per day, the owner may have to adjust the amount higher or lower depending on the adult weight of their rabbit. They will eat more in winter due to greater energy demands for heat and less in summer when they need less energy to keep warm. It is also important not to over indulge the bunny in treats. Treats should be given in very small quantities to dwarfs, think in terms of teaspoons or less. Some popular treats include: oatmeal, fruit, vegetables, herbs, dry bread, and rabbit supplements. When introducing a new treat give a small amount and wait 24 hours to check for diarrhea, if it appears do not give that particular treat again. One should avoid iceberg lettuce, avocado, and treats which are sugary or salty, these can all cause digestive system upsets. Also be sure not to feed produce that contains pesticides or is rotting.

The last aspect of proper diet is plenty of fresh clean water and access to hay. Hay can add fiber to the diet and the roughage helps prevent digestive system problems such as hairballs and enteric conditions. Bunnies also love to chew on it and make a mess. Timothy hay is preferred to alfalfa for pet rabbits because it has fewer calories, also alfalfa is the primary ingredient in pellets. Care should be given to keep water containers clean and free of bacteria. Rabbits also engage in coprophagy, they produce special droppings called cecotropes which contain additional nutrients which they ingest.

Medical Concerns

The best treatment of disease in rabbits is always prevention, a proper diet and strict sanitation is a necessity but most owners at some point will encounter sickness. Catching a problem early is the key to successfully treating a rabbit disease. The owner should check the rabbit daily and know the signs of disease, which include: going off feed and/or water, diarrhea or loose stools, discharge from nose, eyes, or genitals, lumps or bumps, sores, listlessness, decrease in fecal droppings or imbedded hair, and any abnormal behavior or sudden change. It is best to consult a veterinarian for diagnosis and treatment options. Pet owners should locate a rabbit experienced veterinarian before they encounter disease problems. Some of the common diseases rabbits may get include: diarrhea or enteric conditions, fur or ear mites, malocclusion (buck or wolf teeth), snuffles, sore hocks, hairballs, weepy eye, wry neck, and heat prostration.

Pet owners may notice red urine, this is different from blood in the urine. Rabbit urine can range in color from cloudy white to reddish brown, the variations are caused by dietary factors and is not cause for concern. Blood in the urine will usually appear as flecks of blood, if an owner is unsure a trip to the vet for confirmation is best.

Another medical concern for pet owners is whether or not they should spay their pet to prevent uterine cancer. All females are at risk for uterine cancer but how big of a risk is still being debated, scientific studies have found incidences of between 14%-50% in some random bred colonies. Most veterinarians agree that uterine cancer is the most common form of cancer in rabbits but have not come out with an incidence rate for the general rabbit population. Age and genetic background can also influence occurrence. Since there is a behavioral benefit to spaying many owners decide to have it done. It is critical to have a rabbit experienced veterinarian with a low mortality rate for spays perform the surgery.

A last note under medical care concerns types of litter for the litterbox. There are several good types to choose from and each owner has to decide which will work best for them. Some types of litter are not good to use for a rabbit. Clumping cat litter can cause blockages if ingested so it should be avoided. Rabbits often ingest the litter so the owner must be aware of this and not use litters that are toxic. Litters that are very dusty can also cause respiratory problems. Cedar shavings should also be avoided because if too much is ingested it can be toxic. Pine shavings are safe although many pet owners have been misled about using them. Scientific studies from the sixties have shown that untreated softwood shavings induce Hepatic Microsomal Enzyme activity. HME activity is affected by many factors and the studies were done to try and explain why pharmacological studies on drug interaction results varied between different labs, however I have not found any evidence that the increased HME activity is harmful. Heat treated shavings do not cause induction of HME so if the pet owner is really concerned they can use treated shavings.

Grooming

Netherland Dwarfs do not require much grooming. During times of heavy shedding (molt) a slicker brush can be used to remove excess hair and prevent a possible hairball. Rabbits will molt throughout the year but the heaviest molts usually occur in fall and spring. The owner can also wipe the rabbit with a damp cloth or hands to pick up loose hair. Rabbits should not be bathed because it can stress them too much. If your bunny has a dirty spot you can wash the spot or try using cornstarch to remove the stain. The pet owner will also need to trim toenails. It isn't too difficult, unless your bunny does not like to hold still, in that case a towel or second person helps. Most rabbits will get used to being turned over on their backs and this is the easiest position to do the trimming. Light toenails are easiest because you can see the quick and cut below it. If you cut too far and into the quick it will hurt and the toe may bleed. Rabbits with dark nails take a little careful guess work or a flashlight held behind the nail to avoid cutting into the quick.

Breeding Challenge

Breeding Netherland Dwarfs is very challenging, their small size produces an average of only 2-3 kits per litter. They are also prone to birthing difficulties, usually in the form of "stuck" babies. In addition to that we also face the typical problems all rabbit breeders have: weanling enteritis, Young doe syndrome, stillborn kits, to name a few. Being a small breed they can reach sexual maturity as early as three months of age, but breeders wait until they are at least six months old and fully mature before breeding them. Since there are so many different colors of dwarfs the breeder must also take care to learn about color genetics. Breeding incompatible colors can not only cause strange colors to appear in the litter but also affect future generations. Most breeders will also breed to the standard published by ARBA, this means only the best are bred together and any with genetic problems or deformities are removed from the breeding program. Breeders are also careful to breed only those with good temperaments, and not aggressive animals. Despite all the difficulties we might face, the joy of raising a litter of happy and healthy dwarfs makes it all worth it. Anyone who has ever raised or kept a Netherland Dwarf as a pet knows they are truly the "Gem of the Fancy".

ANDRC Official Guidebook 6th Ed, 1996

"Caring for Your Pet Rabbit" Bucky's Bunny Barn, 1997

If you liked this article e-mail me about Bucky Bunny's Guide to Pet Rabbits CD which contains much more information on rabbit care subjects.

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