

Rabbit factfile

Pet rabbits are related to the wild European rabbit, whose scientific name is *Oryctolagus cuniculus*, which means ‘hare-like digger of underground passages’ [1].

The biology and behaviour of pet rabbits is very similar to that of their wild cousins [2].

Insight into the biology and behaviour of wild rabbits can help you to understand your pet better, so check out our top ten facts!

1. Rabbits belong to the Lagomorph order

- Lagomorphs are herbivores (they feed exclusively on plants) and include rabbits and hares [3].

2. Rabbits are prey animals

- Rabbits are most active at dawn and dusk and usually remain underground in the day to avoid predators [4].

Rabbits have lots of physical adaptations to help them avoid becoming another animal’s dinner:

- Eyes located on the side of their heads give them a very broad field of vision [5].
- Large, independently moving ears can make up to 12 per cent of a rabbit’s body surface and enable them to hear really well [6].
- A well-developed sense of smell alerts rabbits to the presence of predators [7].
- Muscular hindlegs are used to stand up on while the rabbit scans for predators and are also thumped to alert other rabbits to danger [8].

3. Rabbits are athletic

- Rabbits have long, powerful hindlegs that allow them to achieve speeds of up to 50 miles per hour for short bursts [9]!
- If chased they use quick, irregular movements to help them confuse and out-manoeuvre predators [10].

4. Rabbits are subtle communicators

- A rabbit's main mode of communicating is via scent [11,12]. They deposit faeces, squirt urine and chin mark to communicate with other rabbits [13].
- Rabbits also use different body postures and vocalisations to communicate. However, their vocalisations are very quiet to avoid detection by predators [14].

5. Wild rabbits live in underground burrows

- Wild rabbits dig lots of underground inter-connecting tunnels called 'burrows' or 'warrens' [15], which can cover more than two acres of land [16]!
- Warrens can house 50 or more rabbits [17].

6. Rabbits are highly social

- Group living is beneficial for wild rabbit survival [18].
- Rabbits are territorial animals and form complicated social structures [19].
- Wild rabbits live in large groups within warrens, which are divided into small family units of two to eight individuals, with a common group being a male and female pair [20].

7. Rabbits have an unusual digestive system

- Rabbits feed on large quantities of low quality food [21].
- To extract as much goodness as possible from the food, rabbits perform a digestive process called caecotrophy [22].
- Food is passed through the gut and special droppings, called caecotrophs, are produced. Rabbits eat these caecotrophs, allowing the food to be re-ingested [23].

8. Rabbits have continuously growing teeth

- A rabbit's top front teeth are called 'incisors' and grow at a rate of 3mm a week [24]!
- Grass and hay are abrasive. Eating lots of grass and hay helps to wear rabbits' teeth down [25].
- Wild rabbits spend around 70 per cent of their time above ground feeding [26].

9. Rabbits are highly productive breeders

- A single female rabbit, a 'doe', can produce approximately 30 young in a single breeding season and can become pregnant again within hours of giving birth [27].

10. Rabbits are intelligent

- Pet rabbits can be taught to respond to commands using positive reward-based training and can also be house-trained [28].