



IT CROSSING – OUTDOOR RABBIT SAFETY INFORMATION

A question, are you sure your rabbits are absolutely safe when out in the garden?

This safety information is designed to highlight the issues surrounding garden safety. We all know how important it is for rabbits to have enough space to exercise but many owners are totally unaware of the risks their own garden may present.

Whether you are a longstanding, experienced owner or not, please take the time to read this information; it may save your rabbits life.



What are the Dangers?

When people think about garden (or outside) rabbit safety, they probably think about them escaping or being attacked by foxes in the dead of night, but sadly gardens can be unsafe for rabbits in many ways. The most common worry is from foxes, but they are not the only predators that threaten your bunnies' safety. Rabbits are also known to have been attacked by cats, dogs and birds of prey. Not only can gardens be a dangerous place because of attackers but some gardens are accidents waiting to happen with dangers such as wells, ponds, open pipes and drains, gaps in the fences, garden sheds and their contents, not to mention toxic or poisonous garden plants.

All too often we hear stories of rabbits that have died from injury caused during preventable incidents. On quite a number of occasions, when someone has contacted The Rabbit Crossing in the past to adopt a rabbit it has come to light that maybe one of their original rabbits has been taken by what was assumed to be a fox, or has just escaped from what was thought to be a rabbit proof garden. In all cases the rabbits could have so easily been protected.

A rabbit rescue local to The Rabbit Crossing decided to record some figures in order to demonstrate how dangerous gardens can be. In 2005 Green Fields Rescue in Bracknell began to note what rabbit owners told them about their pets, and in approximately a year the following were reported (These figures were ONLY those that were reported directly to them and so probably not giving a true figure of how many animals were affected)

48 rabbits were killed or taken outright where foxes were the most likely predator.

8 rabbits had near misses with various predators (including foxes, dogs, cats and birds) & 2 of those subsequently died from shock.

4 rabbits were reported as having bodily injuries consistent with being killed by unknown predators (possibly foxes, cats, dogs or prey birds).

1 rabbit died of shock after the owner witnessed it being attacked for it's loose fur by a pair of nesting magpies.

16 rabbits were reported as having required veterinary intervention following suspected poisoning from garden plants with over half of these ending in a fatality.

4 rabbits were found dead in the garden with no injuries (all these rabbit were vaccinated, suggesting possible plant poisoning)

1 rabbit died less than 10 minutes after digging up and consuming a poisonous bulb.

Every single one of the incidents that were recorded happened when the rabbits were loose and unsupervised in a garden.

The sad fact is that EVERY SINGLE ONE WAS PREVENTABLE.

Dangers from Above

Hard to believe but your rabbits are at risk from birds of prey, even if you live in urban areas.

Having witnessed on a number of occasions, large, hawk type birds overhead or over nearby fields and gardens, I do believe that birds of prey are a very real risk to rabbits that are not protected from above when using the garden to exercise. In 2006, several of us working at a local urban rabbit rescue witnessed a hawk circling very low overhead the rabbit area. We were in no doubt that had the rabbits not been in a secure hutch or run, then the bird may well have attempted to take one.



Rabbits are inherently afraid of birds flapping around them anyway but it is not unusual for larger birds like jays, magpies, crows etc to attempt to pluck fur for nest building directly from any densely furred animal. Often you can see this more commonly with larger animals such as sheep, horses and cows who are much less bothered by the intrusion! Large birds may also attempt to scare rabbits away from their own hutches so the bird can go in and collect the rabbits hay for nesting too!

Danger in Urban Areas

Foxes are now a very real danger to both country living or urban dwelling rabbits. As our towns have expanded, so have the numbers of urban foxes. Their numbers are increasing sharply and more and more stories of fox attacks are heard, not just on domestic pets but now on humans. They have become bolder and don't seem to be bothered by the mankind – often visiting right up to or venturing into human housing. According to The Fox Project (www.foxproject.org.uk), food is easier to find for foxes living in towns and cities than it is for their country cousins and seeing a fox trotting along a town footpath in broad daylight and as bold as brass is more common than you may think. These urban inhabitants are adapted to looking for food both **day & night** and not just during the hours of darkness, as people might imagine, so leaving your rabbits out during the day is still a huge risk and not one worth taking.



A small fox can very easily scale a 6 foot fence. One lady who wished to adopt, came to me when one of her rabbits was taken by a fox. She witnessed it take her free-roaming rabbit in its mouth, jump up a fence and make off. The fox dropped the rabbit just as it jumped and made off without it's meal. The rabbit did not survive the trauma and its resulting injuries.

Foxes are also very capable of digging under a fence if it's easier (foxes are proficient diggers). They are often fearless in pursuit of a good meal, a meal like your pet rabbit. If your garden is "rabbit proof" so that your rabbits cannot get **out**, it means you have actually created an ideal "captive prey" situation for any fox that manages to get in. Please don't imagine you are safe with your house doors open either, foxes have even been reported as entering homes through open windows and doors and even large cat flaps in pursuit of house rabbits.

Whilst many people have never seen rabbits in their gardens or heard their blood chilling barking or howling, it does not mean that the fox is far away.

The Fox Project says: *"Even though people may not see them, an adult suburban fox's territory may consist of around 80 to 120 gardens, plus associated open space such as railway embankments, parks and schools. Urban foxes are now so common that it is probable that every garden in the South East has a fox living nearby."*

Don't let the first time you ever see or hear a fox be the time when it manages to get into your garden and take one of your beloved rabbits.

In Summer 2006 The Rabbit Welfare Association publication "Rabbiting On" contained a specific warning to owners about the dangers of "free range" rabbits including a chilling letter from a distraught owner who had witnessed and been unable to stop a fox attack on one of her house rabbits who was taking a little hop around just outside her open patio door. She ducked inside to make a sandwich and when she heard the noise outside but despite being just a few feet away from the door, it was too late. The fox dropped her rabbit and fled but the owner was graphic in her description of the distress and pain her rabbit was in as it died and of the guilt she felt she would never escape from for not protecting her rabbits. She was also keen to point out that she had never seen or heard any evidence of foxes in her area and her garden was surrounded by 6 foot high fences.

This story, sent in to a rabbit welfare internet site (www.rabbitrehome.org.uk) is further evidence of the problem:
"Watch Out for Mr. Fox"

"It was such a beautiful sunny morning today that I took my rabbits Cara and Sebastian outside in the garden to play; a very good time was being had by all. I looked up and guess what was walking along the garden wall: a fox! I didn't even know there were any foxes here! I happened to be taking photo's at the time, so got this picture - this is the exact moment he noticed the rabbits. Cara went running over to say hello as Marianne and I dived for the wall to chase it away. It's just as well that I never leave the bunnies unattended as they weren't the least bit bothered and would have happily run over expecting him to join in the fun."



The Dangerous Garden

The dangers to your rabbits aren't restricted to those involving predators. The hazards can come from what's growing beneath their paws too! Many common plants, flowers and shrubs are highly toxic to rabbits. It is a common misconception that rabbits "know" what is safe to eat and what isn't, but it simply isn't the case. Couple the fact that domestic gardens contain plant types that wouldn't be found naturally in a rabbit's diet and that rabbits are inclined to "taste" things out of their inquisitive nature, you could end up with a real problem if your bunny ate something they shouldn't.

Did you know...

ALL plants that derive from a bulb are likely to be highly toxic to your rabbit? If your rabbit digs up and eats the bulb itself the results are often fatal and happen very, very quickly. Toxins enter the blood stream and the first sign your rabbit has eaten one of these plants is likely to be too late to save it; the rabbit will usually collapse and die. It is possible that thousands of rabbits a year die this way and are just found dead in the garden with the owners unaware of why the rabbit died or that the death was totally preventable.

Common "evergreen" plants & garden shrubs like box, privet, rhododendron etc are all highly irritant to a rabbits digestive tract. Having eaten it, the rabbit can suffer severe swelling and pain of the lining of the mouth, "foaming" at the mouth and nose and pain and swelling of the throat and stomach. Again, death can occur very quickly and is entirely preventable by the use of an enclosed run.

Can you identify ALL the plants in your garden?

If you can, you need to check to see if they are toxic or not. Recommended lists are

<http://www.adoptarabbit.com/articles/toxic.html>

http://www.medirabbit.com/EN/GI_diseases/Food/Toxic_plants_en.pdf

If you can't identify your plants, you need to do some research before you can be sure your garden is safe. Don't forget, rabbits dig and the bulb or root of a plant is sometimes more poisonous than the leaves, flowers or stem.

Some general advice on the most common toxic plants is available to download here:

<http://www.smallanimaladvice.com/downloads/DanPlants.pdf>

The solution...Prevention

It's really simple:

Don't leave your rabbits loose and unattended in your garden at ANY time, not even for a second. The second you pop in to make a cuppa, answer the phone, go to the loo or change the radio station is all the time it would take for a waiting predator to seize the moment...and probably your rabbit. Or, that could be the moment your rabbit decides to taste that ivy or dig up that daffodil bulb they have never shown an interest in before. Why risk it??

- Prevent predators access to your rabbits and prevent your rabbits from getting access to hazards by investing in a large, secure run.
- Rabbits that are given enough space are far less likely to suffer bone and muscle problems and are also less prone to behavioural difficulties.
- The very best place for a rabbit run is attached to the hutch or shed so that the bunnies can exercise at will. Rabbits are diurnal and their body clocks are naturally set to be most active at dawn and dusk. An attached run means your bunnies can seek shelter from the weather and bolt to safety if a predator approaches.
- If you have house rabbits, but are keen to give them access to the outdoors in addition to their indoor space, it's possible to fit a cat flap into an external wall leading straight into an outside run that is bolted to the side of the house.
- Remember when situating your rabbit run, it's not just rabbits that dig out, foxes dig in, so make sure you have your run on hard standing or on grass that has been meshed under.
- Use a good quality weld mesh for hutches and runs. Don't use hexagonal chicken wire as a fox can very easily bite through it or rip it away from the run or hutch frame. A determined bunny can also bite through to make his escape.
- Make sure mesh is secured to the wooden frame using strong staples and 'U' shaped nails. Even the strongest mesh in the world is of no use if it can be pulled away from its frame.
- Fit pad/slide bolts on all hutch and run access doors and maintain them regularly as the wood swells and contracts with the seasons. Twist catches are no defence at all to an intelligent fox or dog. They can easily become loose with use; remove them and use bolt only fastenings. By only having one set of fastenings, it's easy to see when the door is closed correctly.
- Provide the largest run you can. The bigger the better – the more space you give, the more natural the behaviour you will see. Rabbits need to be able to run around and stand on their back legs to survey for predators.

So remember, if you have your rabbits loose in your garden a predator only has to be lucky once. Your rabbits have to be lucky every single second because to a predator

"Free range rabbits" equals "free range food"