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Cover Story: Tranquility Trail Animal Sanctuary

Travels with Pets
Woof-worthy Santa Fe,
New Mexico

Training:
Camping and
Hiking with
Canines

Doggie News
Alex Quintero Works with
Coconino Humane
Association Project

Horsin' Around
Equine Massage Therapy

Business Spotlight
Dr. Annie Seefeldt -
Chiropractic for Everybody



By Teresa K. Traverse

As Kelly Ames strolls around the cages that house anywhere from 50 to 60 rabbits at any given time at Scottsdale's Tranquility Trail Animal Sanctuary, she tells me their stories.



Overview of bunny habitats

There's the queen: Bianca. Bianca is a large white bunny with red and violet eyes. She occupies space at the front of the sanctuary. She's all by herself and doesn't want to be with other bunnies. But she's a tad unusual for a rabbit: she loves being picked up and held. Ames held Bianca like a child, with her head over Ames' shoulder as we spoke. Ames says when photos of Bianca hit Tranquility Trail's social media accounts, people instantly know it's her.

"A big part of our mission is letting people see these guys as individuals," says Ames, the Executive Director of Tranquility Trail. "Social media is a huge part. Everybody knows Bianca's the diva. They love her. They love that she's a diva."



Phoebe

Tranquility Trail seeks to educate the public about bunnies and serve as a key resource for rabbit owners. While many know of the problems that dogs and cats face, Tranquility Trail Animal Sanctuary aims to give a voice to one animal group that doesn't have many advocates: rabbits. Social media helps them achieve that goal. Tranquility Trail has more than 47,000 likes on its Facebook page.

"They're seeing their personalities and seeing them as individuals and not just kind of this faceless animal that's sitting in a cage," says Ames.

And the sanctuary lets visitors get to know the individual bunnies too. On each cage—which lie side by side each other on the ground and are filled with a mix of colorful blankets, toys and beds—there's a tag affixed detailing the bunny or bunnies' name. One reads: **Lucky and Houdini**. Lucky is a satin angora mix with white around the eyes and Houdini is a satin angora mix. They're brother and sister who were part of a group of

132 bunnies rescued from a backyard. Their birthdate is listed as August 3, 2010. Their preferred bed types are carpet square under box and a blanket on a wood bed. Their favorite treats are apples.

The card also details a diagram of how the cage should be laid out, with a cardboard box and litter box on one end, a tent in the middle and a wooden bed in the opposite corner. Every day, each rabbit gets one hour of playtime in a larger space filled with toys and furniture. Ames tells me the bunnies will move their blankets and furniture if they're not arranged properly—a common bunny trait. Bunnies prefer routine and structure.

"If we're late with their breakfast in the morning, they start slamming their bowls on the ground," says Ames. "They can be very sassy little things."

When I visited during treat time in the afternoon, the bunnies suddenly became more active and aware of what they were about to receive as the bag was brought out.



Eli

"They are a lot more complex than people realize," she says.

Just like people, rabbits like to pair off. And they're also very picky about who they'll share a cage with. When rabbits arrive, they go through what Ames called "*bunny speed dating*" where their cages are placed side by side. If the rabbits bicker, they move on to the next bunny. When a bunny bonds with another bunny, that "bonded pair" will not be adopted separately and are together for life. If separated, rabbits can die of a broken heart, Ames says.

However, there is one common belief about rabbits that's true: they reproduce quickly. The gestation period for rabbits is just 30 days. Rabbits can get pregnant the day they give birth. On average, there are six to eight



Bonding Time

rabbits in a litter. One litter can have as many as 14 bunnies. Occasionally, rabbits will be sold in pairs when they're too young to be sexed properly. And then suddenly owners have more than a dozen bunnies on their hands, which lead to a rabbit overpopulation and is how some of the rabbits find homes at Tranquility Trail.

Ames explains how rabbits are particularly vulnerable: Rabbits are most often used in animal testing of cosmetics and other products. Rabbits are bred for their meat and fur. They can be used as dog fighting bait or as carnival prizes. The rabbits at the sanctuary don't have the camouflage that jackrabbits or wild bunnies have that can help shield them from



Max

predators, like hawks or dogs.

“There’s not a whole lot of protection for them,” she says. “They’re not viewed like a cat or a dog. People don’t really know who they are. They don’t have any large group that advocates for them. There is no large group for the bunnies. It’s up to the smaller groups like us to advocate for them and to educate people as to why this isn’t okay.”

Tranquility Trail receives 1,600 intake requests a year. The waiting list for new rabbits is more than a year long. Most rabbits stay for roughly four years. Rabbits come from all over. Some are owner surrenders. Others are rescued from hoarding situations or are found as strays, like a bunny that was hiding under a ventilation grate at a Starbucks.

Tranquility Trail takes time to vet potential rabbit owners and requires they volunteer before taking a bunny home.



Bunnies sharing their space

“People volunteer before they can take a bunny home because we want people to understand what having a bunny is,” says Ames. “They’re here for life if we can’t find them a home.”

Just what does having a bunny mean?

Ames says they’re just as much responsibility as caring for a dog or cat. But many don’t see it that way. “They’re sold, unfortunately, as an easy starter present for kids. None of that sentence is true,” she says.

Many parents flock to stores (Ames told us that most people don’t think there are any rabbit shelters and head to breeders or pet stores to buy them) to pick up what they think will be a cheap, easy-to-care-for pet.

Since rabbits are considered exotic animals, their veterinary care can cost more. Vets who are trained to care for rabbits can be tough to find. There are only two spay and neuter rabbit clinics in all of Arizona. Most rabbits are small—the largest rabbits weigh about 30 pounds—prey animals, which also means they can be timid and harder to know, much like cats. “They don’t like to be picked up. They don’t like to be chased. They don’t like loud noises,” says Ames. “Being a prey animal, everything needs to

be on their terms. It takes a little while to earn that trust. Kids get bored very quickly.”

When kids tire of the pets and parents decide they don’t want to devote the time and resources toward caring for a rabbit, they’re likely to get discarded. Two months after Easter is known as “dump season.”

Tranquility Trail also provides for the rabbits’ emotional needs. They’ll teach rabbits how to play. And that humans can be trusted. But they’re also a source of information for bunny owners. Tranquility Trail also fields questions from all over the world. One rabbit owner in Pakistan will email to ask about appropriate hay substitutes. People can call and ask questions about their bunnies. Nail trimming is complimentary. The sanctuary also offers boarding. And the nonprofit has grown tremendously since its founding in 2008.

Ames and her business partner originally started the sanctuary as a way to adopt out rabbits in the empty suite next to the one that housed their other business. Unlike many sanctuaries, Tranquility Trail was designed to be open to the public from the beginning. The sanctuary is open seven days a week and visitors can drop by without an appointment. Volunteers undergo a one-hour long training period and then they’re free to volunteer whenever they have time. Tranquility Trail is privately funded. All of the proceeds from the sanctuary’s 2,000 square foot retail store, which sits at the front of the roughly 3,000 square foot space where the rabbits are housed, help fund the nonprofit. Tranquility Trail also accepts donations, much like The Salvation Army or Goodwill.

Over the summer, kids ages 5 to 12 will visit to learn more about what it means to care for a rabbit at camp. Each child is assigned a “bunny buddy” and must clean their cages. “*Summer Bunny Camp*” information is on their website. The nonprofit also runs the “*Holiday Pet Festival*”, the largest holiday pet-related adoption event (free to attend) in Arizona, held every December at WestWorld of Scottsdale.

Since its early days, Tranquility Trail’s reach extends far beyond its home in Scottsdale. Out-of-state residents and people from as far as Russia have visited. The sanctuary also offers chances to sponsor a bunny or even send the bunnies presents. “People can really feel like they’re part of the Tranquility Trail family because they see the bunnies getting the toy that this person sent from Hong Kong,” says Ames. “They really get to know the bunnies.”



Coconut

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