



National Jersey Wooly Rabbit Club

Dedicated to the promotion, development, and improvement of the Jersey Wooly - "The Fluff of the Fancy"



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Dealing with Biters By: Theresa Wooden

Although we rarely have a Jersey Wooly that becomes a biter (they are generally docile), it does happen once in a while. In our experience it is usually a buck that becomes aggressive to the point of biting. Although some territorial does may grunt and lunge as if they might bite, it is usually all an act... Generally, when does are concerned, the "grunt and lunge" is followed by "retreat and hide".

Biters, on the other hand, grunt, lunge, and nail your hand -- Often so swiftly that you don't see it coming. The bite is usually quick and sometimes followed by "retreat and hide," but more often by a defensive stance with tail up and direct eye contact that just dares you to try it again.

The surprising thing is that each of these bucks were sweet and docile as youngsters, and then turned into raging maniacs without warning or provocation. So, what gives?



The Problem with Teenagers:

Just like their human counterparts, some (not all) rabbits go through a hormonal storm at around the age of four to six months. Sweet Fluffy will hang out of the cage door and fall into your arms today, and next week will leap out of the cage with teeth bared, looking for a good fight. This baffling behaviour can be downright hurtful if we love Fluffy and can't understand why he doesn't love us anymore! As a matter of fact, after one or two good nips we stop being hurt and start getting mad... "Okay, you wanna' piece of me?! C'mon!"

Just like dealing with human teenagers, it's best to keep a cool head and simply establish boundaries (see "Establish Dominance," below). If you can ride this out for a couple months, you will probably see the amazing transformation into a decent, level-headed adult. However, if you over- or under-react, you may set up a system of behavior that will be difficult to change later on.

Mine, Mine, Mine!!!

"This is my space and you can't come in!" is the motivation most commonly seen in does but also present in bucks. Simply put, they have a very small space and when you present your hand into that space it seems even smaller, and that is threatening. In addition, if you are very loud or move very abruptly, this could also be seen as threatening and provoke a defensive attack.

You Smell Funny!

You have just been examining or handling one rabbit, and now you place your hand into the cage with another rabbit of the same sex. The "Scents" overwhelm the "Senses" and your hand must be put in it's place! "How dare you come in here smelling like that!" This is most common in very active bucks -- in fact we've never seen this behavior in a doe.

I'll Get You Before You Get Me!

If the rabbit is very afraid of being hurt or handled (have you been reacting over-aggressively?) it may decide to take you out before what it perceives as an anticipated attack. We have seen this in a few animals surrendered for adoption and have wondered what they have experienced to make them so mistrusting and frightened. This type of situation takes time and patience to improve, as there is some sort of trauma to overcome.

Mother Bear

Very maternal does may become biters in defense of their babies... How could you possibly blame them!? They are only doing what comes naturally to protect their young. Admirable, even though annoying. The good news is that this type of biter is definitely linked to a period of time -- she has a litter -- and will be unlikely to bite once the litter is weaned and gone.

Genetics

There are certain breeds that are known for aggression and biting. Although beautiful and challenging to raise, they are not for beginners or for youth. Also, with these breeds you must acknowledge that the risk comes with the territory, so to speak, and must not hold their aggression against them. It is bred into them, they can't help it.

In addition, there are certain varieties and bloodlines within each breed that may know for their aggressive tendencies. In Jersey Woolies, the Blue-Eyed-Whites used to be known for nasty temperaments. While in our barn all BEW's have been docile and sweet, we have been witness to some real psycho BEW's that came out of other lines. Nevertheless, most of these bad-tempered animals have been bred out of the breed's lines by now, and it is rare to come across one that is truly vicious.

Okay, now we know some reasons WHY rabbits may become "biters," so... What can we do about it?

Establish Dominance

This will usually work to keep an adolescent buck in his place so that you can at least fill the feed and water bowls. When he runs up to the front of the cage to challenge you, very quickly bring your hand down on top of him and push his shoulders to the floor, holding him there for five to ten seconds. (This is a calculated move -- be fast and firm or lose a finger, your choice.) He will struggle. Hold him down firmly, but do not impede his breathing or risk injuring his spine. 98% of the time, when you release him he will run to the back of the cage in disbelief and think about it. You may have to repeat this a few times before he gets the idea that you are bigger than him and really should be left alone.

Limit Your Own Threatening Behavior

DO NOT hit him, throw things at him, or use another object to push him away. This will only irritate and frighten him and could lead to permanent behavior problems. Talk to your rabbits in a calm, kind tone of voice. Do not be loud, don't move abruptly, and always pick them up out of their cages with gentleness and respect. Stay calm and be predictable... they will always know exactly what to expect from you.

Show Your Strength

DO NOT play the weaker member of this dominance game, for instance darting in to grab a bowl and darting back out, obviously intimidated. Your little monster will actually get quite a kick out of this power struggle and may turn into a tyrant, sitting around all day just waiting for you to come play "the game".

Identify and Eliminate Perceived Threats

Some bunnies respond aggressively to very specific perceived threats. For example, in our barn we found that our Britannia Petites (a very aggressive breed) would bite if we introduced our hands into the cages high above their heads, but not if we come in low at the bottom of the doors. Evidently the hovering hand is a threat.

Neutering

Sometimes a buck may be so hormonal that may need to consider neutering in order to affect a change in his behavior. This is rare, but may be your last resort if all other tactics have failed and the animal is over 8 to 10 months of age. At that age he should be well through his "terrible teens". Just be aware that once a rabbit is neutered, it can no longer be shown as an exhibition animal. It will be a pet, only.

Cull the Animal

If all else fails, you may have no choice but to surrender the animal to an experienced breeder who will use it only for production and knows how to deal with the behavior. If you purchased the animal from a reputable breeder, they will likely take it back and replace it for you with a more docile animal.

DO NOT give such an animal away as a pet to a child or adult who has no idea what to do with it. When all other efforts fail, extremely vicious animals should be put down humanely.

Membership Info: Individual Annual Adult membership 1yr \$15/3 yr \$35----Youth (18/under) 1yr \$12 ---- Family Membership (2 adults and any children under the age of 19 legally residing at the same address) 1 yr \$25, 3 year \$60 ---- Outside US All non-US Residents add \$5 service charge per year. *Fluff Magazine* - Membership includes yearly subscription to *The Fluff* magazine. Members receive *The Fluff* (Quarterly Publication) as well as The National Jersey Wooly Rabbit Club Official Guidebook (Free with initial membership). Memberships can be paid online or mail-in.