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].