

A garden will only be secure until the time comes that it isn't

UNSUPERVISED, OUTDOOR FREE-RANGING RABBITS – The dangers that lurk

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We are all aware that rabbits need lots of space and enrichment in order to perform natural behaviours, stimulating them mentally and physically, and allowing them to lead a happy and enriched life.

The RWF recommends a minimum floor space of 60 feet, although we need to remember that this is a minimum and we should always strive for better, if and where we can.

Many people allow their rabbits unsupervised, free-ranging outdoors in their garden, but can this ever be 100% safe and what are the potential dangers?

Why do people allow rabbits free-roaming?

There may be several reasons why allowing your rabbits unsupervised free-range access to your garden may seem a good idea. It allows rabbits to run and forage with the only restrictions being the size of the garden; it means owners don't need to invest in a large enclosure, which they may see as unsightly in their garden or too expensive; and free-range access to a garden may be perceived as a more 'natural' life. Although it may sound like a good idea, there are many risks and dangers if we allow our rabbits free access in a garden.

Can I make my garden secure?

Yes and no! We all probably think our gardens are secure and to an extent they may be, but a garden will only be secure until the time comes that it isn't, and often by that point it is too late. The rabbits may escape or be captured and injured, or worst still, killed by one of the many

predators which prey upon rabbits.

You can attempt to make your garden safer, but it will never be 100% safe. Rabbits can dig out of gardens, squeeze through small gaps in fences, and predator attacks can come from above or at ground level, with bushes being fantastic places to hide. Even six foot fences are no deterrent for urban foxes or cats.



The use of a Runaround system will also help to provide your rabbits with more space, in a safe and secure way

Photo: T Rose

The dangers that lurk

Let's take a closer look at what the potential dangers are:

- **Ground dwelling predators** - these include foxes, weasels, rats and cats (both pets and strays). Contrary to popular belief, urban foxes are generally not fearful of humans and will hunt during the day, especially if they have young to feed. The shock of coming into contact with a predator can be enough to literally scare a rabbit to death, even if they are not physically injured. Foxes will scale six foot fences, with little or no problem, and even if you have never seen a fox in your garden, it doesn't mean they are not visiting. Cats, weasels and even rats can pose a danger - once cornered, the rabbits have nowhere to escape to.
- **Attacks from predators above** - some birds of prey can pose a risk. Whilst most tend to hunt smaller prey, such as mice, if the opportunity arises, they may launch an attack on a rabbit in the garden, especially smaller rabbits, swooping down upon them in the blink of an eye. The shock of this may be fatal.
- **Poisonous plants** - can you ever be 100% certain what plants are in your garden? If you can't, then it may be that you have poisonous plants within the garden, which may be harmful to your rabbits.
- **Neighbour problems** - sadly, some of us don't get along with our neighbours, and whilst none of us like to think that anyone would deliberately cause harm to animals, cases of neighbours throwing poisoned food over fences have been reported in the past, especially with dogs. Rabbits with free-roaming access to gardens would be in danger of coming into contact and ingesting anything thrown or dropped over your fence.
- **Escape routes** - rabbits are prolific diggers and it doesn't take much for them to dig out under a fence. They can also squeeze through small gaps, which may not be visible if they are situated behind plants, trees or bushes, or may appear after strong winds and go unnoticed. Gates can also be left open by accident or swing open in the wind, leaving an escape route.
- **Injuries** - rabbits can injure themselves on items left in the garden, such as tools or children's bikes and toys.
- **Theft** - sadly, the theft of animals from gardens has increased over the years, and rabbits can easily be captured and stolen from gardens, even when owners are at home.

Watching your rabbits in the garden

Being outside with your rabbits, constantly watching them whilst they are free-roaming, will dramatically reduce the risks but won't completely eliminate them. As mentioned, urban foxes are not fearful of humans and may still stalk and launch an attack, even if you are watching your rabbits. Unless spotted early, it is unlikely you would reach your rabbit before a fox. There is also the risk you may be distracted, may pop inside for something leaving the rabbits at an increased risk, and even just a few minutes alone may be enough for something untoward to happen.

Supervised free-range access can give rabbits much more space to run and explore, which is good for their physical and mental health, but we need to adequately balance the risks and benefits for the rabbits and ensure they are never left alone.

How to provide 'freedom' safely

The best way to ensure your rabbits get the necessary space and enrichment is to house them in a secure enclosure. The enclosure needs to be big enough (at least 3m x 2m x 1m high) to allow the rabbits to run, hop,



Photo: A Wilson

We need to adequately balance the risks and benefits for allowing supervised free-range roaming

binky and roam around. There must be a sheltered area to allow them to move out of the wind, rain and sun, and there should be opportunities for digging, foraging and climbing onto different levels. Tunnels provide the opportunity to run through and sleep in, and it goes without saying that all rabbits should have the company of another rabbit. There must be a secure roof on the whole enclosure and you need to ensure the rabbits have 24/7 access to the space all year around, so it is cool in summer and warm in winter. They should not be shut in a small area overnight. If your rabbits are known to attempt to dig out, you will need to make sure they cannot do this by burying wire under the soil. Check the enclosure on a regular basis for any damage which may weaken it.

The use of a Runaround system will also help to provide your rabbits with more space, in a safe and secure way.

Conclusion

We all want our rabbits to be happy and seeing them running, playing and exploring makes us happy too. However, we cannot be certain that our garden is safe - even if we take every precaution we can, there is still some danger associated with allowing rabbits free-range roaming. Rabbits are safer when housed in a secure enclosure, which is big enough to meet their natural behavioural needs and allows them the same opportunities to run, binky, dig and play, as free-range roaming would, but in a controlled way.

It is part of caring for our rabbits to ensure we take steps to keep them safe from danger, and as such, the RWAf does not recommend unsupervised free-range roaming due to the potential dangers discussed.



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