

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Do bunnies come out at night?

January 23, 2026

Jane 00:20

This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public. I'm Jane Lindholm. On this show, we take questions from curious kids all over the world, and we find answers. Today, we're going to talk about an animal. I know, I know we talk about animals a lot, but that's because you send us a lot of questions about animals. Today's animal focus is of the small, fluffy kind. Let's see if you can guess what we're going to talk about. Some of these animals live in our homes as pets, but you'll also see them out in the wild, even if you live in a city, these critters are pretty well adapted to living in city parks or suburbs. These animals are mammals, and they're often mistaken for rodents, but they're actually a very specific kind of mammal called a lagomorph. One last hint, these animals are famous for their long ears and poofy little white tails. Okay, you've probably guessed it. Now we're talking about rabbits today, and our guest is someone who not only studies and loves rabbits, but has also spent a lot of time living with them in her home. Her name is Margo DeMello.

Margo DeMello 01:30

I study human animal interactions, and I have specialized in rabbits for my whole adult life, and I've rescued them for forever. But then, in an academic sense, I study all of the sort of facets of the human animal relationship.

Jane 01:49

Professor DeMello teaches at Carroll College in Montana, and her field is anthrozoology. Anthro means human, and zoology is the study of animals. So anthrozoology is the study of how humans and other animals coexist and interact. She also rescues rabbits and rehabilitates them in her own home.

Margo DeMello 02:11

I have 12 right now, which for me, is a pretty low number.

Jane 02:17

12 sounds like a pretty high number to me. Professor de Melo says it can be pretty cool to live with rabbits.

Margo DeMello 02:23

I mean, I live in a multi-species household. I always have. Rabbits are much more recently domesticated and cats, and certainly the dogs, dogs have been with us for, you know, tens of

thousands of years, and so they still retain so much of their wildness. And so to have an animal in your home that has a wild spirit, like, there's something about that that I don't know. It's, it's, um, there's something about that.

Jane 02:51

But there are also annoying things about living with lots of rabbits,

Margo DeMello 02:55

Um, the gates, the baby gates, the bunny gates, whatever you want to call them the X pens, because I have, right now, two groups, and then a single and a single, I'm trying to integrate to one of my groups. That means I have to have gates in between them. Rabbits are super territorial, and so introducing a rabbit to another rabbit is not necessarily an easy job, and if you just left them to their own devices, there'd be a lot of fighting. And at my age, climbing over those gates every day, that's not as fun as it was maybe when I was younger.

Jane 03:32

Do you want to tell us how old you are? Or no?

Margo DeMello 03:34

I'm 60.

Jane 03:35

So 60 is not as fun climbing over gates.

Margo DeMello 03:38

No.

Jane 03:39

Margo DeMello has been working as an animal rescuer for many, many years now. So we want to make sure we're not confusing you into thinking you should just pluck a wild rabbit from your local park or field and try to make it live in your house. And even domesticated rabbits are not always the easiest pets to have, so you should think very carefully before badgering your adults into getting you one. But in the meantime, let's learn more about rabbits and get to your questions. Before we dive in, do you remember a big vocabulary word I threw out at the beginning of this episode? I said rabbits are sometimes confused with rodents. In fact, they used to be classified as rodents, but now they're known to be in their own category of animal called a lagomorph, L, A, G, O, M, O, R, P, H.

Margo DeMello 04:26

And then within the lagomorph order are rabbits, hares and pikas. So it's a fairly small order with only three different types of animals in it.

Jane 04:38

Hares look a lot like rabbits, but they have even longer ears, and they're generally larger and taller than rabbits. Pikas have sort of a more rounded look, kind of like groundhogs or prairie dogs with smaller

rounded ears, and they live in cold, usually mountainous regions of North America and Asia. One thing rabbits, hares and pikas have in common is that they have two front teeth called incisors that grow constantly throughout their lives. Lagomorphs also have something really distinctive, a second set of front incisors that grow directly behind the first pair. Imagine your two front teeth, and if, instead of just the two there, you had two more behind and you had four front teeth instead of two. Want to know something else that you might find kind of gross about lagomorphs. They eat their own poop. Lagomorphs actually have two kinds of poop, and one of the kinds is a little bit softer and greasier, and it's really high in vitamins. So they eat it. Maybe the less said about that, the better. So let's get back on track.

Margo DeMello 05:47

And then the rabbit itself. There's not just one rabbit. There are hundreds of rabbits, so different genera, that is the plural for genus and different species. So many, many different rabbits around the world.

Jane 06:02

How come some rabbits are wild rabbits and other rabbits are pets?

Margo DeMello 06:08

So there's of all of the hundreds of rabbits that exist on the planet, a single species has ever been domesticated, and that is our rabbit. And so the single rabbit that was domesticated is colloquially known as the European rabbit. The genus and species is *Oryctolagus cuniculus*, and that is the one that was domesticated.

Jane 06:33

So sometimes, when I go to my county fair in the summertime, there are rabbits there, and there are long haired rabbits and short haired rabbits and rabbits that are white and rabbits that are brown and rabbits that are black and rabbits that have long shaggy ears, those are all one species of rabbit, even though they look so different.

Margo DeMello 06:52

Yes, that is one species of rabbit. Every single domesticated rabbit on the planet is a European rabbit is *Oryctolagus cuniculus*. And all of those variations, the color, the hair, length, the ears are only a few 100 years old.

Jane 07:11

Wow, that's fascinating. All right, so Penny is seven and wonders,

Penny 07:15

Why are bunnies called bunnies?

Margo DeMello 07:18

I see bunny as just a familiar kind of, an affectionate term. Some people use it to refer to the babies of rabbits, but technically, that's not correct. They're kits. And so usually we use bunny because it's this acute kind of, it sounds softer, I think, in the mouth, to say, than rabbit. And so you know, when you talk

about something that is cute or that you have some affection towards, Bunny is just sort of a cuter word.

Jane 07:47

So baby bunnies, or baby rabbits, if you're using the proper name, are called kits, same as Fox babies. A few more interesting facts about rabbits, they live in burrows, so underground, and they prefer to live together in groups.

Margo DeMello 08:03

They are a social species. They are gregarious. Most rabbit species are the domesticated rabbits, absolutely, just like humans, just like most primates, gregarious, which just means social. So they thrive in social groups, and that is one of the reasons why, if you're going to have a pet rabbit, it's nice to have pet rabbits with a companion.

Jane 08:29

I love that vocabulary word that you used, gregarious. When we think of humans who are gregarious, we think of them as being very outgoing. They like to talk. They like to be in social situations. So that's sort of what you mean about rabbits, too. They like to be together.

Margo DeMello 08:44

Yes, yes. They're happier touching someone else. I get the sense that part of what they're doing is sort of catching up on their lives together by having this sort of period where they're just kind of grooming each other's fur and checking in with each other.

Milo 09:03

My name is Milo. I'm three years old, and I want to know why bunnies have fur?

Margo DeMello 09:11

Because they would look terrible naked. That's the basic. No. Well, all mammals have fur. Mammals, that's one of the kind of characteristics of a mammal, and so they wouldn't be mammals if they didn't have fur. Now, rabbits are born. Here's another vocabulary term for you. Rabbits are born altricial. And what that means is they are born without fur, and their eyes are closed. They're essentially very undeveloped, as opposed to hares, another legomorph, they are born precocial, and that means they do have their fur, and their eyes are open and they're kind of ready to go. So rabbits are more immature when they're born. But to be a mammal, to get entry into the Mammal class, I think you have to have fur.

Isha 09:58

Hi. My name is Isha. And I'm nine, and I live in Israel. Why do bunnies have tails?

Adam 10:04

My name is Adam and I'm six years old. I live in Evergreen Colorado. Why do bunnies have puffball tails?

Margo DeMello 10:12

So their tails are useful as a form of communication. Humans show their emotions through their facial expressions. That's what our facial musculature has sort of evolved to do, is to communicate our emotional feelings to outsiders, and that's why we spend so much time looking at each other's faces. A lot of animals don't have the same facial muscle structure as humans, and so they don't have the possibilities of moving their face, but they still need to communicate to others, and in particular for rabbits, because rabbits don't use their voices, they really have to use their bodies. And so you're going to have way more muscles around things like their ears, their tail, and so the tail, as cute and small as it is, signals really important stuff to other rabbits.

Jane 11:09

Hang on a sec. Did you catch that rabbits don't usually use their voices to communicate with each other? Margo DeMello says they do sometimes make noises if they're really scared or hurt, and they can also make non verbal sounds by thumping their feet when they're alarmed or annoyed, or making a sort of purring sound when they're happy, by clicking their teeth together really fast, but teeth grinding often suggests they're in distress. So if you have a rabbit as a pet, it's important to learn their signals so you know what your rabbit might be communicating to you. Okay, back to bunnies cute little tails. How come they're so small if the tail is important for communication?

Margo DeMello 11:51

if we think about animals with longer tails, they are animals that often use them for balance, rabbits are ground dwellers, and in fact, they're underground dwellers. When we're talking about the European rabbit, they live in burrows underground, and so they don't need any of that. Also prey animals. Think about other types of prey animals. Think about deer and those kinds of animals. They have shorter tails, because if you are being chased by something, the last thing you want is to have a big tail behind you that somebody can grab.

Jane 12:22

Are you able to look at a rabbit's tail and you can tell anything about what it's feeling or or its behavior?

Margo DeMello 12:33

Um, there's, yeah, there's definitely. It's, it's, again, it's subtle. If you live with a rabbit, you have to learn subtle, more subtle kind of cues in their body. But one of the things that people who live with rabbits always note, and especially if they have a rabbit who's got a particularly sassy personality, that when they're doing something naughty, or you scold them because you don't want them chewing on their wall or whatever it is that they're doing, they will flick their tail at you. And again, it's very quick, and it's kind of subtle, but it's pretty easy to, once you have that relationship with that rabbit, to understand that they're basically saying, Well, I'm going to do what you're asking. I'm not going to like it, and the second you turn around, I'm gonna do it again.

Jane 13:21

Sassy bunnies. After the break, more questions about rabbits with anthrozoologist Margo DeMello, like, why do bunnies hop? And can bunnies see behind themselves without turning their heads?

Jane 13:33

This is But Why. I'm Jane Lindholm, and today we're learning about rabbits with Margo DeMello, a friend of rabbits and a scholar of human animal interactions.

Maria 13:46

Hi, my name is Maria, and at four years I live in Toronto, Canada. Why do bunnies hop?

Evie 13:53

I live in McDonough, Georgia. Why do bunnies hop?

Ailish 13:57

My name is Ailish, and I am six years old. I live in Dublin, Scotland, and my question is, why do bunnies hop?

Nikolina 14:07

Hi, my name is Nikolina, and I'm seven years old. I live in Philadelphia, and I want to know why bunnies hop instead of walk like a regular animal,?

Margo DeMello 14:22

Right? Rabbits actually can walk. A lot of people don't realize that they can walk. When a rabbit is in a new environment and are very kind of curious or nervous, they will walk. The difference between walking and hopping is pretty subtle. Walking involves four different legs moving in four different sort of times. When you hop, what happens is your two front legs move independently, but the back move is a group. And for this particular type of prey animal, they need to have speed, and so they've got fairly, you know, muscular back legs. Those back legs are also really useful for digging. The front legs do a lot of the work of the digging, but the back legs also do it. They push the dirt behind them, and given that they are diggers, it serves them in those ways. It also makes their running away a little bit more erratic. For a predator, they do this thing that we call binking in the rabbit world. That is not a scientific term, but we all use it. And what that means is, in other animals do this as well other prey animals, it is a form of play where they hop and and twist and sort of dance. And you see that with the young, young deer lambs. You know, those kinds of animals will do that as babies, and they typically don't tend to do it as adults anymore. And for rabbit, it's super critical, because if you're being chased by a coyote or a fox or something, and you don't run in just a straight line, but you twist and you turn. It's a good way to evade those predators. So I don't think I'm directly answering why they hop, but their hopping is beneficial to them, and it is in part, a result of their back legs and the need to have these back legs the way that they are.

Jane 16:26

Do hares and rabbits have different legs and different ways of moving?

Margo DeMello 16:32

Yes. So when you look at a jackrabbit, which is another confusing term, because jack rabbits are hares, not rabbits, so they're again, they're born precocial, so they're already kind of getting started as soon as they come out. And they are much faster and much stronger than a rabbit, for sure. And one of the

reasons for that is, if we think about where a lot of hares live, we're talking open spaces. We're talking about not a lot of cover. We're also talking about animals that do not burrow and so for evasive tactics, for predators, those legs are critical. So yeah, they're fast, they're strong. To be kicked by a jackrabbit is not a, as far as I understand, I've never been kicked by a jack rabbit, but I've seen it, and it's pretty significant. Those legs, they also their ears, which are another important defense mechanism for both rabbits and hares. And they can control their ears. They can move independently of each other. That's another super good way of deterring while detecting predators, so that you can then take some evasive action.

Jane 17:47

What do rabbits eat?

Margo DeMello 17:49

They can eat a lot of things. Their bodies are evolved for them to eat a very high fiber diet, and so that means typically consistent with kind of low nutrient, low calorie diet, so they have to eat all day. They pretty much are kind of foraging and munching all day long, because they need to get, if they're in the wild, a variety of food from all kinds of places to bring in a mix of the right nutrients that they need within our homes. Of course, you can just buy commercial pellets, which is what most people do. But even with the commercial pellets, which have all the nutrients, they still need the fiber from the hay, and they still need the variety, because they're an animal that is primed to be eating all the time, if you only fed them, let's say, two times a day. Their guts can't handle that. Their digestive systems need to be moving all of the time, and so that's why they need to have other kinds of food that they can get access to all day long. And it's also just part of what they do. They're like, I need to have I need to have a bite to eat right now. I just need to have a little bit of munchie, bit of munchie right now. So they eat high fiber foods. They are vegetarians. They do not eat any animal products. But they're also like us, in that they have a sweet tooth, and so that means that fruit, they adore candy, and which is as good for them as it is for us, probably worse, but they will steal. They'll steal chocolate. They'll steal anything that looks like it could be good. And they can really, really develop a problematic sweet tooth if you help, if you indulge that.

Jane 19:33

We have several questions from kids who have heard stories that have rabbits eating carrots or lettuce and strawberries or carrots and radishes. And Karen, who wrote to us, says:

Karen 19:49

Why does most stories have rabbits eating carrots if that's not good for rabbits in real life?

Margo DeMello 19:58

In small quantities, they're absolutely fine of vegetables, they are a fairly high sugar vegetable, and that is another reason why they're going to like them.

Jane 20:07

So for domesticated rabbits, in small doses, those kinds of foods are not bad, but normally rabbits need to eat a lot of grasses, a lot of things that are just not as full of that sugar as some of those vegetables and fruits might be.

Pippa 20:23

My name's Pippa. I am six years old. I live in Burlington, Vermont, why do bunnies have long ears?

Elle 20:33

My name is Elle. I am five years old. I live in California, Campbell. Why do bunnies have long ears?

Margo DeMello 20:40

So the ears do a few things I mentioned before that they're incredible for detecting predators, because they, so the longer that the ear is, the the longer that canal is, and it could funnel down sounds that other ears, like ours would never be able to detect. They pull them down in the other is temperature regulation. Rabbits don't sweat, they don't pant. And every mammal has to have some sort of a way to regulate their temperature. And that's what those ears do. In particular, they they will help in hot weather to kind of keep that animal a little bit cooler.

Bella 21:24

Hi, my name is Bella. I'm from Erie, Pennsylvania. I'm five years old. And why do rabbits have eyeballs at the side of their heads?

Hannah 21:36

My name is Hannah. I'm five years old. I live in Roswell, Georgia. How can bunnies see behind themselves without moving their head?

Nikhil 21:48

My name is Nikhil. I am six years old. I live in Norwood, Massachusetts. How can rabbits look behind themselves without even turning their heads?

Margo DeMello 22:00

Sure. What they need, again, as prey animals, is to be able to see around them. And so when those eyes are on the side of your head instead of the front, you don't have depth perception, but what you gain is almost 360 degree peripheral vision. So yeah, they can see on the sides. They can see, not fully, fully, there's going to be two blind spots in a rabbit's vision. One is directly in front of their nose, which is one reason why, when you meet a new rabbit, you don't put your hand out the way that you might for a dog, because they basically can't see it, and then it's going to be a threat to them, so right in front of their nose and immediately in the back of their head, right in the back everything else they can see.

Jane 22:47

A lot of prey animals have eyes that are spaced out toward the sides of their heads, because they want to be able to see if something is coming.

Margo DeMello 22:56

Right.

Gwen 22:57

My name is Gwen. I am six years old. I live in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Why do bunnies come out at night?

Margo DeMello 23:11

So technically, they're not nocturnal. They're crepuscular.

Jane 23:16

Crepuscular is one of my favorite words. It refers to twilight, that time right around dawn or dusk when the light is low. So crepuscular animals are most active in the hours around sunrise and sunset.

Margo DeMello 23:30

And I am assuming that evolutionarily, that has to do with, again, predators. There's going to be predators at any any time, but depending on the environment in which you kind of emerged. And for our domestic rabbits, that would be the Iberian Peninsula. So in other words, Spain and Portugal, you know, millions of years ago, whatever predators were in that environment at that time is how those rabbits would have developed that type of a system of being most active, morning and night, and then remember, they have those burrows that then they could retreat to.

Jane 24:06

So if you want to look for rabbits in your neck of the woods, try going for a walk or sitting quietly at the edge of a hedge or field early in the morning or right around sunset. Okay, let's leave it there. Thanks to Margo DeMello for sharing her knowledge and love of rabbits with us. She's an assistant professor of anthrozoology at Carroll College in Montana. As always, if you have a question about anything, have an adult record you asking it on a smartphone using an app like voice memos, and then have your adult email the file to questions@butwhykids.org. But Why is produced by Sarah Baik, Melody Bodette, and me, Jane Lindholm at Vermont Public and distributed by PRX. Our video producer is Joey Palumbo, and our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. If you like our show, please have your adults help you give us a thumbs up or a comment on whatever podcast platform you use to listen to us, it helps other kids and families find us too. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious.