

MARIAS ANIMAL SHELTER



NEWSLETTER

ISSUE 28: AUTUMN - WINTER 2026

MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

Thank you for your continued support! In this new issue, we share behind-the-scenes shelter life, recent rescue updates, key shelter statistics, and practical ways you can help this month. Your support, whether through adoption, fostering, donations, or sharing our work, makes a real difference to every animal in our care. Together, we're giving vulnerable animals safety, comfort, and a brighter future.



Do you have something to share for the next issue?
Drop me a message with your comments & suggestions!

CHARLIE



STEVEN REES-WEBB

EMAIL ME: HELLO@SRWPHOTO.CO.UK

OUR PATRON

We extend our deepest gratitude to Tony Martin CBE, founder of the Anthony V. Martin Charitable Foundation and patron of our shelter. His unwavering support and dedication have been instrumental in advancing our mission at Marias. As a Commander of the British Empire (CBE), the highest-ranking Order of the British Empire award given to those who have made significant and positive impacts through their work, we can truly attest to the profound influence he has had on our organisation and the community we serve.



HOW IT ALL BEGAN...

Whether you've been cheering on Marias incredible work for years or you've just stumbled upon our cosy corner of Cornwall, we'd love to share the heartwarming tale of how it all began...

Back in 2001, there was a charming little pony named Fly. Fly was facing homelessness because her owner, sadly battling cancer, could no longer care for her. That's when Maria, an animal enthusiast studying Animal Care at Duchy College, stepped in. She had no idea that welcoming this one pony would lead her to create a sanctuary that's now a haven for hundreds of animals!

Seeing a desperate need for a rescue centre in Cornwall for unwanted pets and animals, Maria took a brave leap. She decided to open a shelter and fund it herself, a bold move that soon saw everything falling into place.

As luck would have it, the land in the village where Fly lived was the perfect spot for a shelter. With permission granted, Maria, her husband Paul, and an amazing team of volunteers, friends, and family rolled up their sleeves. Together, they built the first sheds, pens, and cosy nooks, transforming a simple plot into a bustling sanctuary.

Fast forward to today, and Marias Animal Shelter is alive with the chatter and clucks of around 100 animals! Goats, geese, ducks, chickens, sheep, guinea pigs, rabbits, degus, gerbils, and hamsters all call it home. Most arrive because they've been abandoned or are unwanted. Some have been neglected and need a bit of extra TLC. Thanks to Marias dedication, many find loving new homes through her successful rehoming programme. For those who need a permanent place to stay, the shelter becomes their forever home.

To keep this wonderful work going, Maria registered the shelter as a charity with the Charity Commission in 2012. Relying entirely on donations, every spare moment Maria has is spent caring for the animals, fundraising, or spreading the word. Unfortunately, the number of animals needing help is on the rise, but with your support, we can make a real difference!

So, grab a cuppa and read on to discover what's been happening at the shelter, along with all the latest news. If you think you can help in any way, please get in touch, we'd love to hear from you!

LETTER FROM MARIA



Here we are in August, well that's when creating the newsletter started but people will usually receive the result until the end of September. The weather has been so hot, 4 heatwaves so far this year. It's fortunate that my long-suffering husband of nearly 40 years put in a ceiling in the rabbit's adoption block (A 60ft by 30ft building, so quite large). If this had not happened, I think we would have lost a few rabbits to the heat. There is only so much you can do.

Fans do not seem much good or any of the ice pods etc that you can buy. We have noticed this year that towels soaked in cold water and laid out flat are a big hit. Most of the bunnies used them and the next day we would go round with cold water jugs and gently pour water over the towels to wet them again. One of the things we are wishing for is to be able to buy solar panels for the building. If this happens then we could afford the electric for air conditioning units to be installed.



WATCH US ON YOUTUBE



[HTTPS://YOUTU.BE/5LZ4_7UNVPA](https://youtu.be/5LZ4_7UNVPA)

A FOSTER HOME FOR DAPHNE

We had three New Zealand White rabbits surrendered to us in April. All had been living separately, and none had been neutered, although their vaccinations were up to date.

We could tell that the male was in considerable pain. He had an unkempt coat, sat awkwardly and behaved quite aggressively because of the pain. He was prescribed Metacam for arthritis and is now a completely different, happy rabbit.



He will remain in foster care for the rest of his life. Daphne, one of the female rabbits, was passing blood in her urine before arriving at the shelter. Both females went to be spayed, but one was found to have significant changes to her uterus, indicating the possible start of uterine cancer. We decided not to neuter Daphne because she had two symptoms, including bleeding, which made it highly likely that her cancer had progressed further.

We are now looking for a permanent foster home where Daphne can live out her days in a family environment with plenty of interaction and affection. She was initially hand-shy and lacked confidence around people, but this has now changed. Our volunteers have spent a great deal of time with her, and she is enjoying life and plenty of snuggles.

Please get in touch if you would like to help, and we can provide more information.

THE FUZZYWIG STORY

Mr Fuzzywig was one of the hoarding cases from 2024, where we took out 54 guinea pigs and 6 rabbits from horrific conditions, the worst rescue that we have ever done (you can read about it in Issue 25). Mr Fuzzywig had to fight to survive and in doing so became very aggressive and defensive, once he no longer had to live in survival mode.



At the shelter the rescues have ample space to get away from each other, shelter, water and food resources freely available to them. Mr Fuzzywig then showed that he wanted no other guinea pig around him. We had him castrated in the hope that a delightful female would come his way but he remained vigilant and would not tolerate any guinea pig around him.

Fuzzy wasn't in the best of health. Due to breathing in the stench of ammonia fumes from his previous home, he was found to have scarring on his lungs so can sometimes have respiratory issues. Gunky ears are another problem for Fuzzy and due to him being a mixed breed teddy type, he has scurvy, flaky skin. He does have small eyes, his eyelids do turn inwards a little as well as his eyelashes, which in turn means that when he blinks, the eyelashes scratch his eyes.

This I imagine would be very irritating, so all in all dear little Mr Fuzzywig has put up with a lot through his life so far.

UPDATE, we are so extremely lucky that our fantastic volunteer vet, Jo put in a referral to a specialist eye vet Optivet in Devon. Optivet are going to try and reduce costs for us and give us their individual time for free.



As well as this, Jo is also dedicating her time and is going to be there helping with the anaesthetics. It is amazing when people are so kind and work together to help the sick animals, who would be suffering without it and I cannot thank them enough. We will give you an update in the next Issue.

We have also hopefully come up with a plan for Fuzzy's hyper vigilance that might be due to his traumatic past, his anxiety causing him daily stress to the point that a lot of his life was spent hiding away, any attempt of finding him a friend became pointless. We are trialling him with anti-anxiety medication and within a day noticed a completely different guinea pig. He no longer spends all his time hiding away but ventures out, this is even when people are present. Friend wise, he is currently living next to a female guinea and we are praying that this works, so he can have companionship.

One good outcome so far for this beautiful pig is that he has found a fantastic foster home where all his needs are catered for and he is closely monitored for any deterioration.

PARASITES

Parasites are common in guinea pigs, but less so in rabbits. Most of the animals surrendered to us have parasites, so we treat them routinely. This is not advised in a home environment, where you should only treat animals when symptoms appear.

Animals naturally carry small numbers of certain parasites that do not cause concern. Treatment becomes necessary when the parasites become a burden or when an unwell animal's immune system cannot control them.

Parasites We See at the Shelter

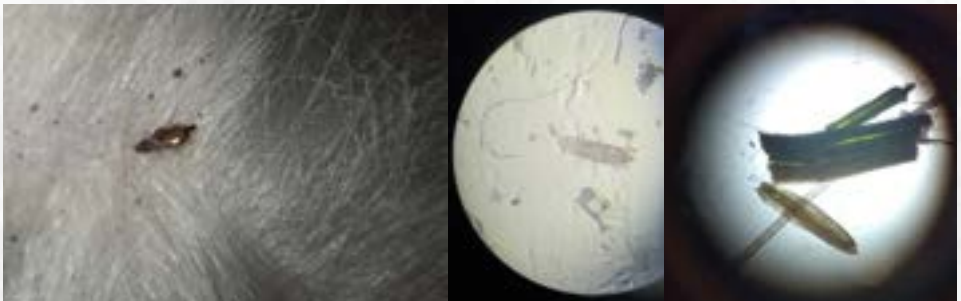
Static lice or hay mites (*Chirodiscoides*) are very common. They appear as tiny, dark specks on the hair and can look like dirt when there are many of them.

Running lice are also very common. If you have good eyesight, unlike me, you may spot tiny white specks moving through the hair.

Sarcoptic mites are less common. They can be difficult to eradicate because the females lay eggs beneath the skin. These eggs tend to burst through the skin when the animal is stressed.

Harvest mites (*Trombicula autumnalis*) are seasonal and less common. We have seen them in both rabbits and guinea pigs.

Chyletiella (*Otodectes*) is quite common in rabbits.



SYMPTOMS

- Constant scratching
- A V-shaped area of hair loss along a guinea pig's back
- Pain or discomfort when certain areas are touched
- Crying while scratching
- Bald or thinning patches
- Black, dirt-like specks on the hair
- Open sores caused by intense itching
- Tiny holes where sarcoptic mite eggs have hatched



In extreme cases, guinea pigs can suffer seizures because they continually scratch open sores. These cases are very serious. The guinea pig may need to wear body bandages to protect the wounds and help break the cycle of scratching.

TREATMENT

There are several ways to treat parasites in guinea pigs.

Gorgeous Guineas produces a range of shampoos and anti-parasite shampoos for guinea pigs. You must complete the recommended course of treatment to kill the parasites.

At the shelter, we usually use ivermectin once a week for four weeks. A few days after each ivermectin treatment, we use an anti-parasite shampoo such as Fleaordie.

Contact your vet if you are worried about your animals. Your vet can help you create an appropriate treatment plan. It is important to follow the full course of treatment until all the parasites have been destroyed.

You must also clean the enclosure thoroughly to kill any parasites or eggs living in the guinea pigs' home. Use a suitable disinfectant and spray all cracks, crevices and furniture. Throw away the old substrate and replace it with fresh, good-quality hay.

Rabbits must not be bathed. If necessary, your vet can prescribe a suitable topical treatment to kill mites and fleas.

The accompanying photographs show parasites found on animals at our shelter.

GRIEF

By Marga Jackson Soza

Today we have lost our very first baby, Soap, my very first rabbit. He was my routine, my reason to live. We woke up for him and we went to bed thinking of him, and we made our lives fit around his needs and care. Now remains the void of grief. Everything about grief and love has been said already. This is, I believe, because it's one of the very few truly universal experiences that go beyond words and reason.

What cannot be said is what stays with us forever, which is the origin of our love.

Grief is a funny thing, because it thrives in the interludes of the later, when it happens, and the never, once it's through.



At the time it's still a future to come, but the pain, the creeping one, slowly settles in, as does the realisation. You see shadows that were and will never be again, which remind you of the loss. His periscoping, his flopping, his little jump to the litter tray, his little drinking noises, the cuddles...

Once the pain and grief have faded enough, we move on. Move on inasmuch as the pain still exists but is buried, inasmuch as we learn to ignore the ghosts. We grow more love around it.

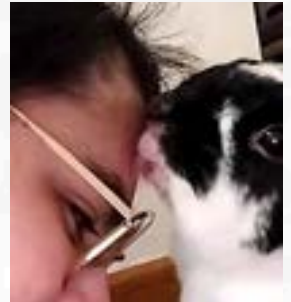
We're able to make plans again, to speak about our loved ones without tearing up and feeling guilt, shame or pain.



We speak about them proudly as they fade away as beings and evolve into a myth, a symbol. It feels as if their deaths were years ago, but they may have happened mere months ago. We never forget them, but we learn to live around that void.

Today we've lost the soul of our house, and we're crying. But we look to the future brightly because he's taught us to love and has made it impossible for us not to want to love again.

Rest in peace, Soap. May you find elation over the rainbow.



CAN YOU HELP MARIA RESCUE AND CARE FOR SICK AND UNWANTED ANIMALS?

Any amount you can give will go towards giving an animal a clean and warm bed, food, care and medical treatment while we try to find them a new and loving home.

DIRECT DEBIT

Could you spare a small amount each month? £2? £5? £10?

You can setup a "recurring direct debit" directly through your bank either online or by giving them a call and using our bank details below.

BANK TRANSFER

Make a quick and simple transfer directly to us, this is the easiest method and ensures that 100% of the money goes to the shelter:

ACCOUNT NAME: MARIAS ANIMAL SHELTER

SORT CODE: 30-88-22

ACCOUNT NUMBER: 18735760

ONLINE

Donate online with a credit or debit card using PayPal (No account required), follow the link on our website:

WWW.MARIASANIMALSHELTER.COM/DONATIONS

CHEQUE

To donate by cheque please make them payable to "Marias Animal Shelter" and post them to our admin office:

MARIAS ANIMAL SHELTER, 44 PARKENGAR, PROBUS, TR2 4JT

SHELTER STATISTICS

JANUARY – SEPTEMBER 2026

168 NEW ADMISSIONS

133 ANIMALS ADOPTED

22 PASSED AWAY

58 WAITING TO COME IN

TOP 3 ADMISSION REASONS:

1. HOUSE MOVES
2. POOR OWNER HEALTH
3. CHILD LOST INTEREST

HARRY & HECTOR

By Michael & Sarah Wixen



After losing our house bunny, Prince, late last year, we found the house incredibly quiet, which made the grief of losing him that much worse. After a few months had passed, we started looking for rabbits at different rescue shelters. We knew we wanted an established pair, preferably bucks, having had two before.

We saw Harry and Hector on the website and contacted Maria for more details. We learned that they had come into her care at only a few weeks old and had been at the rescue for nearly a year. We arranged to meet them and decided to bring them home after that first meeting.

During the first few weeks, Harry and Hector were incredibly nervous. They were reluctant to leave their large hidey box and seemed to run away every time we moved. They also spent a lot of time humping each other. We contacted Maria, who explained that this is perfectly normal behaviour for young, bonded male rabbits during spring and in a new environment.

We would be lying if we said we were not worried during those first few days that perhaps we were not the right fit for them. Although they have their own rabbit room, it is connected to our lounge, so we interact with them a great deal every day, as we both work from home. We felt quite guilty that we were scaring them all the time.

As time went on, the humping reduced and they began to trust us more. Every morning, while they ate breakfast, I sat with them and stroked them for progressively longer periods. We were careful to build up gradually how much we stroked and handled them.



They have now been with us for fifteen weeks and are much more comfortable around us. They constantly run up to see what treats we might have for them. Both are happier being stroked and have been picked up a few times for nail trimming and health checks. They have settled into their bunny routine and know when we get up, when they have breakfast and when it is time to return to their room for bed.

They love doing zoomies around the lounge, which they can access all day while we are home, and they are now much braver about exploring it.



Everything has been scent-marked and gets a nibble if we are not looking. Harry is by far the nosier and more inquisitive of the two, but he is less confident than Hector. Hector has remained his laid-back self and loves throwing himself over for several snoozes throughout the day.

They visited the vets in early June for their annual vaccinations and were very well behaved. The vet checked their teeth thoroughly because Harry had previously undergone dental work at the rescue centre. Harry had gained 100g at that point, and a little more since, so they now look very much alike.



We have discovered that Harry has a sweet tooth and loves his weekly treat. Hector was less keen at first, but he has now discovered, along with Harry, the joy of an occasional strawberry. Both are fantastic hay eaters and spend most of the day chomping away when they are not exploring or napping. We're delighted with how they are settling in and are so glad we adopted them.

A massive thank you goes to Maria's Animal Shelter for allowing us to adopt them and for the fantastic work they do for all the animals in their care.

GUINEA PIGS CAN HELP OUR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

By Katharine Frayling

Pets can be more than companions. Interacting with animals can improve our mental health and well-being by reducing anxiety and stress and supporting our emotional health. Owning a pet can have a calming effect because of the unique bond we share with animals. They give us companionship and unconditional love and are much more than “just a pet”.

Emotional and Psychological Benefits

Relationships with animals can provide emotional and psychological benefits. Their companionship and comfort can reduce feelings of loneliness. Petting and caring for animals releases the feel-good hormones oxytocin and dopamine. This can reduce the body's level of the stress hormone cortisol, lower blood pressure and heart rate, and improve mood.



In the UK, specially trained assistance dogs support people with conditions such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Their company can reduce signs of trauma and create a sense of safety and well-being.

Dogs can also serve as emotional support animals, offering comfort and companionship. They can help children with autism by providing emotional support, developing social skills and promoting independence.

Having a Routine

Caring for a pet involves daily routines and responsibilities that can help provide structure. This can bring a sense of motivation and purpose while encouraging interaction with other pet owners.

If you cannot meet people in person, many reputable online communities allow people to share their pets and connect with others.



Owning and Caring for a Pet or Volunteering

People who cannot own a pet because of their living situation or the financial cost may find that volunteering with an animal rescue offers similar benefits. It provides a connection with animals while helping to care for those in need. Our bond with animals can support our mental health and well-being. Caring for an animal, cuddling them, talking to them and welcoming them into our lives can brighten our days, touch our hearts and bring us joy.



FUZZYWIG'S FOSTER HOME

By Louise



Mr Fuzzywig must be the most complex guinea pig I have ever had.

I saw the shelter's epic rescue and later saw a photo of Mr Fuzzywig, who was called Elvin at the time. I read that he had lung damage and other health issues and felt incredibly sad for him. He was such a young guinea pig and had never experienced a loving, healthy and safe environment before arriving at the shelter.

I asked to foster him and bond him with my recently bereaved guinea pig, Tofu. Tofu had recently lost his companion, Rooster, and was also in foster care with me.

Tofu was a really gentle, sweet-natured boy. Sadly, the bond was unsuccessful. Mr Fuzzywig wanted to be friends and showed great interest in Tofu. He would even popcorn excitedly beside him, but then, without warning, he would bare his teeth like a lion and attempt to bite Tofu. This made Tofu wary and nervous. Despite another attempt after allowing them to live side by side for a while, we had to stop the bonding process.

Tofu was introduced to a new foster boy called Sparks, and the bond was successful from the start. Poor Mr Fuzzywig remained alone. After several months and discussions with Maria, we decided to try again, this time with an adorable, chilled-out girl called Biscoff. The bond seemed promising at first, but it had to be halted because of Mr Fuzzywig's aggressive behaviour. We decided to wait a year or so for him to mature and for his teenage hormones to settle. After Tofu passed away, Mr Fuzzywig lived happily beside Sparks, although attempts to bond them were unsuccessful. They could roam freely together on the floor, but this would only last for about 20 minutes before Mr Fuzzywig became defensive at the flick of a switch. This was disappointing because he was always so excited to be with Sparks at first. Continuing was unfair to Sparks, as the younger guinea pig was becoming a nuisance to the old-timer, who wanted an easy life. They continued living happily side by side until Sparks passed away.

Engaging with Mr Fuzzywig was not always simple. Giving him carpet time was a non-starter because he did not enjoy roaming freely. It was the same when he went outside in a pen on the grass. He felt too vulnerable and would freeze in one spot when he was alone, although he was much happier with Sparks beside him.

He preferred the safety and comfort of his cage, which he explored in his own time. I added a ramp and loft that he loved, and he enjoyed going up and down to investigate whatever I had placed there. Enriching his life was important to me. He was not a guinea pig who raced to the bars at the sound of my voice, but he would raise his head in acknowledgement, wander over and take a treat from my hand. These small gestures meant the world to me and were extremely rewarding.



Although Mr Fuzzywig is aloof, he enjoys having Calendula cream applied to his ears. As I rub it in, he closes his eyes and relaxes.

The damage caused earlier in his life breaks my heart. He was regularly attacked by other guinea pigs, as the scars on his ears and his demeanour show. His lungs are damaged, and his breathing has sometimes become so impaired that he has needed hospital treatment. Oxygen, nebulisers, antibiotics and anti-inflammatory medication have saved his life.

The shelter has supplied me with a nebuliser to use at home. When I notice that his breathing has become laboured, I give him treatment to help him breathe more easily. This has been very successful.

Fuzzy's hair is extremely dense and needs regular trimming and bathing. I use a shampoo from Gorgeous Guineas that helps remove scurf, but Mr Fuzzywig does not enjoy these sessions. Even with high-value treats, there is a limit to how long I can treat him. That is fine because there is always tomorrow. With a troubled and traumatised chap like him, patience is essential. Mr Fuzzywig also has an irritating problem with his eye. It must be difficult for him, but he accepts my care without malice.

Despite his difficulties, Mr Fuzzywig is an absolute pleasure to foster. I am proud to be his foster mum, and my whole family loves him dearly. Someone once asked me why I did not have him put to sleep. Was it fair to keep him going with all his troubles and difficulties? None of this was his fault. The same is true for every animal at Maria's Animal Shelter.

Some animals brought into the sanctuary have never experienced a kind hand, fresh food, enrichment or company. Every living creature deserves these things. I take enormous satisfaction and pleasure in showing Mr Fuzzywig that he is loved and that not all humans are unkind.

Mr Fuzzywig may have complex needs, but so do we all. We all have good and bad days, but his good days far outweigh the bad. He is not in pain, he is loved, and he blooming well loves his treats. He wants to continue enjoying them for as long as possible, as we all do.

Mr Fuzzywig has gone to board at the shelter. I had an awful fall that resulted in a dislocated and broken shoulder. I cannot pick Fuzzy up, so the wonderful Maria and her team have stepped in to help. While at the shelter, he has seen a couple of vets and has been put on anti-anxiety medication. The treatment has been so successful that he is attempting another bond, this time with a beautiful girl called Chilli. The vet has also arranged a consultation with a veterinary eye specialist who will hopefully be able to fix his poorly eye.

Things are looking up for Mr Fuzzywig, which proves that we should never give up because wonderful things can and do happen.

ARE YOUR ANIMALS READY FOR WINTER?

Practical tips for outdoor rabbits and guinea pigs

Cold and damp weather is tough on small animals. The good news is that a few simple tweaks now will keep them warm, healthy and comfortable all season.

Start with space and routine. Rabbits must have permanent access to a large exercise area. Our minimum is 12ft by 7ft for a bonded pair. A hutch is not acceptable but if you already have one, adapt it to make it longer. Hutches were only made so it would be easy to grab a rabbit for food. Sheds and large wendy houses are perfect. Guinea pigs need at least 5ft by 2ft for a pair, ideally with a run attached so they can roam. Keep them in one environment. Do not bring them into a heated house at night and put them back outside in the day.

Make housing warm, dry and draught free while keeping ventilation. Raise the sleeping area off the ground and pack it with plenty of fresh eating hay so they can burrow. In severe cold, move the set up into a naturally lit, car free garage or shed. Secure runs on all sides and the top, and protect the edges so nothing can dig in or out. Keep guinea pig accommodation on a single level if you can.

Do quick winter checks every day. Water freezes fast, so check bottles and bowls several times. Diet should be hay led, with a small handful of leafy greens and a measured nugget food. Avoid muesli mixes. Weigh weekly and call your vet early if you see sneezing, runny eyes, reduced appetite or changes in droppings. If you add warmth, use only purpose made heat mats.

Companionship and enrichment matter in winter too. Rabbits and guinea pigs are social animals and should live with their own kind; never house guinea pigs with rabbits. Offer hides, tunnels and simple foraging so they stay active and generate natural warmth as they explore.

Keep jabs up to date. Nobivac Myxo-RHD PLUS covers myxomatosis, RHD1 and RHD2. Because a highly virulent RHD2 variant is circulating, ask your vet about adding YURVAC RHD. It is given in addition to the usual vaccine, typically at least two weeks apart.

OUR AMAZON WISH LIST

To make it easy for our supporters to donate items that we need to support the animals, we have created an Amazon Wish List. This list includes a variety of items that are essential to the care and well-being of the animals in our care. By ordering items from our wish list, you can help us provide the best possible care for the animals we serve. We are grateful for your support and thank you for considering a donation to our cause.

Items on the list start from just £2 and can be ordered for delivery directly to us at the shelter. You can order from the other end of the country or the other side of the world.

[HTTPS://AMZN.EU/DDPGQ2R](https://amzn.eu/DDPGQ2R)



DEGUS

By Ellie



Back in April, we took on over 40 degus. They came from terrible living conditions, in a small, dirty cage. There were 40 degus in a cage unsuitable for even 1. It was horrifying, they were all mixed sexes, meaning there was constant breeding and no control over it, this also meant they were all extremely interbred. They were also fed an extremely unsuitable diet, including things like spaghetti, which is really bad for them, degus have an extremely



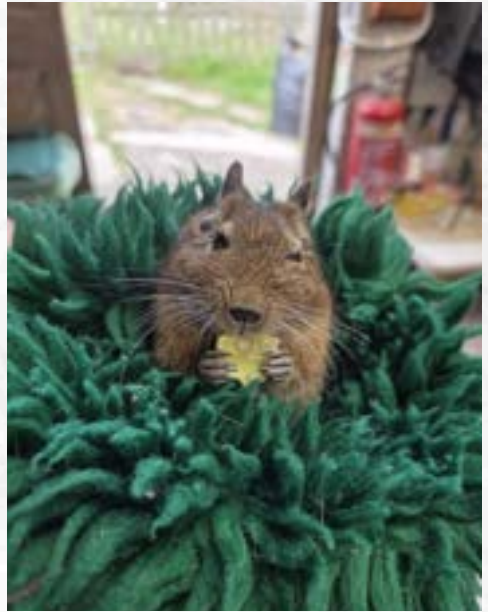
specific diet and should not eat anything outside of their diet. When they came to us, we had barely any space. We had no choice but to split them into a few groups and have them in small cages, luckily another wildlife charity stepped in to help us. After we completed sexing all of the degus, Woodside Animal Welfare Trust contacted us and kindly took all of the females.

Unlike my college experience, where learning outcomes were clearly defined, Maria's animal shelter teaches me lessons that are less structured but equally valuable. Here I began to understand how small, consistent actions could significantly improve the neglected or abandoned animal's welfare.



Volunteering at Maria's shelter bridged the gap between academic knowledge and real-world experience. It has reshaped my understanding of what it truly means to care for animals, not just as patients but as individuals with unique personalities and requirements. It has made me think more deeply about what I would like to do after education and whether I would like to open my own shelter. It had never been something I'd thought about before, but working here has shown me just the amount of animals that need a home and need support, which has inspired me to potentially take that path in life.

When these degus first came in, they were very timid, and were not interested in human interaction. But after many weeks of hand feeding them treats, and letting them get used to our voices and surrounding noises, they started showing personality. Now the boys will run up to the door of their enclosure whenever anyone walks near, hoping they were going to get treats, and every time the door is opened, they're climbing up it trying to escape and take the food. They also never let you clean in peace; they absolutely love to watch you and try to help when you're cleaning, usually they will take the dirty bedding to the clean side of the cage but they think they're helping and that's enough.



These boys have improved so much since they first came in, and they are so much happier.

Earlier on in the year, a volunteer spotted that one of the boys had an eye injury, due to this we had to give daily medication and attention. Luckily it wasn't extremely serious, but due to the fact that all of these boys look very similar it was difficult to locate the boy, or keep track of his medication under a specific name.

Despite their growing humorous personalities, all of our degus have had little interest, meaning they will probably stay with us for a while, and as much as we love them, we can't provide them the space and attention they deserve, so we would love if they found homes.

OUR EXPERIENCE OF BONDING BUNNIES

By Lindsey and Family

Whilst it has been over four years since we bonded our house rabbits, I often think about the process and how the bonding setup took over our lounge, where the bunnies live! In May 2021, our boy rabbit, Peter, now named Pete, sadly lost his first girlfriend. Pete has always been deaf, and he seemed very withdrawn. He no longer ran to the stairgate in the lounge doorway to greet us because he couldn't hear us. When he had a friend, she would run to the stairgate and Pete would follow, feeling the vibrations of her movements across the floor.

After a few weeks of seeing Pete so sad and withdrawn, we contacted Maria's Animal Shelter to find him another friend. That's how we met Honey. We probably should have found Pete a new friend sooner, although we didn't feel ready, and we think things happen for a reason. From our first bonding experience, we understood the process and Maria's recommendation to take things slowly.

It made sense. The bonding information on the Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund website was also helpful.

Honey came home on 18 June 2021, and we arranged the lounge so the rabbits could live side by side with a fence between them. Both rabbits had been neutered.

Although one side of the setup was smaller than the other, it was a temporary arrangement during the bonding process. We also practised "scent swapping", which involved moving the rabbits into each other's pens daily while leaving their litter boxes and bedding in place. This forced each rabbit to eat, sleep and use the litter tray while surrounded by the other's scent. This helped them become familiar with each other's scent, reducing territorial behaviour and making acceptance more likely.



**Pete & Honey meeting
for the first time**



Liv and the bunnies



Bonding in neutral area



Bonding sessions two



Finally bonded

We're not sure it was love at first sight, although Pete and Honey were interested in each other from the start. Pete was probably still missing having a friend, while Honey seemed excited. They often sat close together on either side of the fence. After three weeks of living side by side, we introduced Pete and Honey in a neutral area, our kitchen, on 10 July for their first short date. A neutral area is essential for bonding because it helps prevent territorial aggression.

Since the kitchen floor was tiled and potentially slippery, we covered it with a large sheet. I remember covering my arms, keeping gloves nearby and having a piece of cardboard ready to separate them if necessary. I also placed piles of hay and sprinkled pellets around the room to give the bunnies something to do. As expected, there was some chasing and mounting when they first met. It was clear that Honey was the dominant rabbit. I was able to sit on the kitchen worktop at the other end of the room and let them experience their first date together. Over the next week and a half, Honey and Pete continued to have longer bonding sessions together in the neutral area. It was no surprise that Pete groomed Honey first.

After spending a night together in the neutral area, it was time to introduce them in the lounge without fencing between them. All went well, and on 22 July, just under five weeks after they first met, they became roommates without a fence.

Once rabbits have bonded, it's important not to separate them, even for vet visits. We always take Pete and Honey to the vet together in the same carrier, even if only one needs an appointment, so they can remain together for comfort. Their different personalities work well together. Pete is relaxed, while Honey is much more active. As the hearing rabbit, Honey acts as Pete's extra set of ears, alerting him to what is happening around them. Pete and Honey still have the occasional bicker, chase or mounting episode, but most of the time they happily lie side by side in different spots around their living space.

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Probus
Truro
TR2 4LP

Correspondence Address:
Marias Animal Shelter
44 Parkengear Vean
Probus
Truro TR2 4JT



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www.mariasanimalshelter.com
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