

SHORT REPORT

Association Between Rabbit Café Visitor Experiences and Motivations to Feed Feral Rabbits in Vancouver, British Columbia

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Abstract

In Vancouver, British Columbia, feeding feral rabbits is prohibited due to risks to animal welfare and public health, yet feeding remains an ongoing issue in areas where populations of abandoned pet rabbits persist. One potential alternative to feeding animals in the wild is engaging in human–animal interaction opportunities in controlled settings such as rabbit cafés. This short report examined factors associated with visitors' reported likelihood of feeding feral rabbits after visiting a rabbit café. Non-parametric analyses were used to examine differences in reported feeding likelihood across demographic and experiential variables. Younger visitors reported a higher likelihood of feeding feral rabbits in the future compared with older visitors, while no differences were observed by gender or pet ownership status. Patrons who reported disappointment with their café interactions also reported a higher likelihood of feeding feral rabbits in the future. This study is limited by reliance on self-reported future intentions; further research is needed to understand motivations of individuals who actively feed or are concerned about feral rabbit populations. Understanding how human–animal interaction opportunities shape attitudes and behaviors toward urban free-living animals may help inform visitor education and management strategies that support both public engagement and animal welfare.

Keywords: *wildlife feeding; compassionate conservation; pet café; human-animal interaction*

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In Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, populations of European rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus domesticus*) that are descended from abandoned pet rabbits can be found in urban parks and are frequently fed by visitors.^a Feeding these feral rabbits is prohibited and can incur a fine. Research suggests that feeding urban wildlife can cause habituation to people, nuisance behaviors, and a dependency on feeders, which together lead to lower fitness and health.¹

Previous research suggests that motivations to feed wild animals include observing or photographing the animals, gaining their trust, education, and entertainment.¹ Therefore, a potential way to satisfy these motivations may be to encourage human–animal interaction in pet café settings. In Vancouver, rescue organizations lead efforts to rescue feral rabbits, as well as accept owner-surrendered pet rabbits. Some sociable rabbits are transferred to a rabbit café, where patrons can interact with the adoptable animals.^b However, little is known about the relationship between structured human–animal interactions in settings

such as rabbit cafés and motivations to feed animals living in the wild. The objective of this short report is to explore associations between visitors' experiences and characteristics at a rabbit café and their reported likelihood of feeding feral rabbits in the future.

Methods**Procedure**

The data used in this study were part of a larger survey, which asked visitors ($n = 202$) about their experiences and preferences for individual rabbits. Briefly, the survey was administered in person twice weekly to a convenience sample of visitors as they exited a rabbit café in Vancouver, BC, from June 26 to August 7, 2024 (response rate = 64%).

Data

Participants were asked about their likelihood of feeding feral rabbits (called 'wild' in the survey to ease understanding) in the future, which was measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely). Variables with a hypothesized relationship to future feeding included

^a Rabbits. City of Vancouver. Accessed March 1, 2026. <https://vancouver.ca/parks-recreation-culture/rabbits.aspx>

^b Rabbitats Report: 2022. Rabbitats. Accessed September 29, 2025. <https://rabbitats.org/blog/rabbitats-report-2022/>

visitor age (18–25, 26–35, 36–45, 46–55, and 56+), gender (woman or gender diverse, man), pet ownership (no pets in home, pets in home), and disappointment in interactions with the rabbits (no disappointment, disappointment).

Analysis

All analysis were conducted in R version 4.4.1.² Likelihood of feeding feral rabbits was summarized using the median and interquartile range (IQR), reported as Q1–Q3 (25th–75th percentiles). Likelihood of feeding feral rabbits in the future was not normally distributed, so non-parametric tests were used. Wilcoxon rank-sum tests were conducted to compare likelihood of feeding across binary variables, and a Kruskal–Wallis test with Dunn's post hoc test was used to identify differences in likelihood of feeding across visitor age groups.

Results

Full descriptive information and results of comparisons can be found in Table 1. We found no difference in likelihood of future feeding of rabbits by gender or pet ownership; however, visitors who were disappointed by their interactions at the rabbit café reported higher likelihood of feeding feral rabbits in the future (median = 5.0, Interquartile Range (IQR) = 2, 6) compared to those who were not disappointed with their interactions (median = 2.5, IQR = 2, 4.25; $W = 2526.0$, $P = 0.01$). As well, likelihood of feeding rabbits differed significantly across age categories ($\chi^2 = 27.9$, $P < 0.001$). Post hoc tests indicated that visitors aged 18–25 years old were more likely to feed feral rabbits compared to those aged 36–45 ($P < 0.001$) and 46–55 ($P = 0.005$). No other pairwise comparisons of age groups were statistically significant.

Discussion

The present analysis found that younger visitors reported a higher likelihood of feeding feral rabbits in the future.

In contrast, there was no association between likelihood of feeding and gender. This finding contradicts literature on community cat feeding, in which those who feed are mainly older women.^{3,4} Younger individuals may view feral rabbit feeding as an opportunity to interact with animals, particularly where opportunities for direct contact with animals may be limited due to increasing urbanization.⁵ The present study also found no relationship between reported likelihood of feeding and pet ownership status. Previous research has suggested that pet owners not only engage in wildlife feeding more often,⁶ but also support wildlife management strategies that improve the welfare of animals.⁷ It is possible that motivations for feeding feral rabbits differ from motivations for feeding free-roaming domestic animals and other urban wildlife, given the rabbits' liminal status as both urban wildlife and former pets.

Patrons who were disappointed by their interactions at the rabbit café reported higher likelihood of feeding feral rabbits in the future. The majority of individuals who expressed disappointment described wanting to pet or pick up the rabbits.⁸ It is possible that unmet expectations in controlled human–animal interaction settings could motivate feeding behaviors outside of these environments. However, pet cafés typically implement restrictions designed to reduce stress for animals and prevent inappropriate handling. Research suggests that even proper handling (e.g. supporting the back feet and chest firmly) can be a stressor in rabbits and should be avoided, while inappropriate handling (e.g. lifting without hindquarter support) can result in spinal injuries.⁹ As such, providing opportunities for human–rabbit interaction must be balanced with animal welfare considerations. An alternative possibility is that wanting to pick up rabbits as well as feeding feral rabbits may be caused by a factor not considered in the present study, such as a lack of knowledge of or concern for animal welfare. Importantly, this survey does not establish a

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and comparisons of likelihood of feeding feral rabbits (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely) across demographics and disappointment for visitors of a rabbit café

Variable	Level	<i>n</i>	%	Median [Q1, Q3] likelihood of feeding feral rabbits	Statistic	<i>P</i>
Visitor gender	Woman or gender diverse	141	70	3 [2, 5]	4494.5	0.60
	Man	61	30	2 [2, 5]		
Visitor age	18–25	85	42	4 [2, 5]	27.9	< 0.001
	26–35	51	25	3 [2, 5]		
	36–45	43	21	2 [1, 2.5]		
	46–55	15	7	2 [1, 2.5]		
	56+	8	4	2 [1.75, 3.5]		
Pet ownership status	No pets	86	43	3 [2, 5]	4888.5	0.81
	Pets in home	116	57	3 [1.75, 5]		
Disappointment with café interaction	No disappointment	160	79	2.5 [2, 4.25]	2526.0	0.01
	Expressed disappointment	42	21	5 [2, 6]		

causal relationship between disappointment and feeding; as such, more research is needed to understand motivations for feeding feral rabbits.

The present survey only asked patrons of a rabbit café about their future likelihood of feeding and did not collect data about actual wild feeding behaviors. It is important to recognize that rabbit cafés may differ in cost, accessibility, and outcomes from wildlife feeding, which may inform different motivations for the two behaviors. For example, for feral cats, one motivation to feed is concern for the health and welfare of the animals (i.e. concern for starvation).¹⁰ There may be similar welfare-related motivations for feeding feral rabbits that are not present for rabbits in a café setting. Further research could examine where motivations to feed rabbits converge and diverge.

In addition, the survey used the term ‘wild rabbits’ rather than ‘feral rabbits’ when asking about feeding to assist with comprehension, which may have impacted attitudes if patrons had knowledge about the difference between the two terms. Previous research has surveyed public members about community cats to identify motivations for feeding, concerns about welfare, and attitudes toward management options to create collaborative solutions that address community concerns.¹¹ Future research could directly survey people who feed feral rabbits, as well as public members who may be concerned about the management of feral rabbits.

Conclusion

Younger visitors and those who reported disappointment with their interactions with the rabbits at a rabbit café reported a higher likelihood of feeding feral rabbits in the future. Future research should examine the motivations and behaviors of individuals who feed feral rabbits to better inform education and management strategies that support both public engagement and animal welfare.

Author contributions

LL: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. SG: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. OK: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. AP: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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Author notes

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