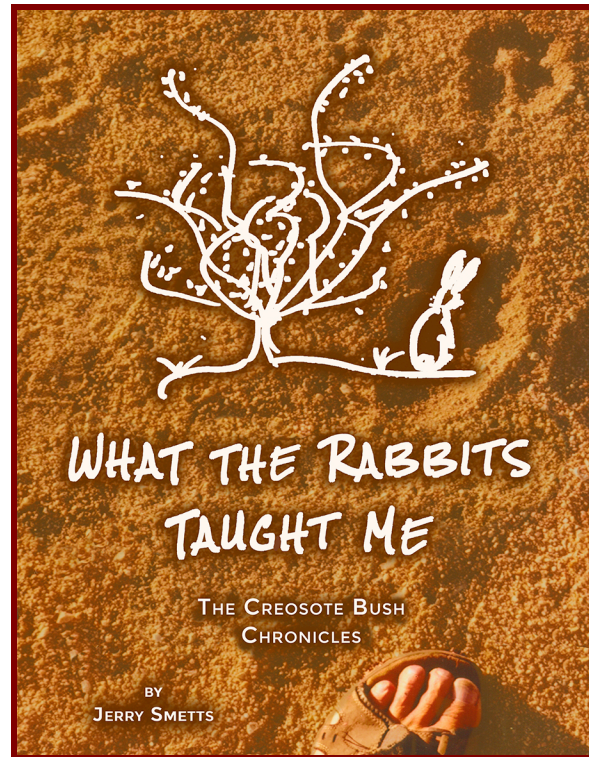


Announcing the publication of

WHAT THE RABBITS TAUGHT ME: THE CREOSOTE BUSH CHRONICLES



written and illustrated by Jerry Smetts

The story of the unlikely friendship of a man named Jerry and a band of wild rabbits in the Mojave Desert of Joshua Tree, CA.

Available now in Kindle, softcover and hardcover at Amazon.

Visit our website at www.dabbitpress.com

Please email jerry@dabbitpress.com
for phone interviews and schedule of 2024 appearances.

About the Author

(in his own words)



When asked, “What motivated you to choose your subject matter?” my response is that the subject (some wild jackrabbits) chose me. I initially had no thought of writing about my rabbit experiences. But I grew more and more interested in the complexity of their personal and social behavior, and I began writing notes, sketching, and taking photos.

When I told my friends about my animal adventures they wanted to come and watch, which didn’t work so well because the rabbits were skittish even around me at the time. So I wrote one-page short stories that I carried around and shared when I was out and about.

Since I got such a good response to my stories, I thought I would run them by a professional in the natural science field. His response was quick and to the point, “Impossible! Wild rabbits would never fraternize with people!” I decided not to pursue that path.

It’s my hope to share with readers the inspiring messages and lessons the rabbits and I learned during our amazing adventure together.



Jerry has always been interested in rabbits but never imagined he would one day befriend this wildlife species. Neither Jerry's life, nor that of the jackrabbits and cottontails who congregated in Jerry's backyard, were ever the same.

Jerry has lived in the environs of Joshua Tree CA since the turn of the century, where he communed harmoniously with several wild jackrabbits and a hoard of cottontails during the years 2016-2021.





“Humans hand-feeding wild rabbits? Impossible!”

So said a know-it-all
wildlife expert.

But in the sleepy desert town of
Joshua Tree CA, some jackrabbits
and a man named Jerry forged a
friendship.

In pictures, drawings, and Jerry's
own words, this is their story.



Join Jerry, his long-eared friends, and a rambunctious bunch of cottontails
in their wild adventure of backyard antics that offer some human-worthy
lessons about getting along, sharing
with others, and being a better rabbit
(and human!).




DABBIT PRESS
Joshua Tree CA
USA

BACK BOOK COVER

EXCERPT

CHAPTER ONE: JUNE

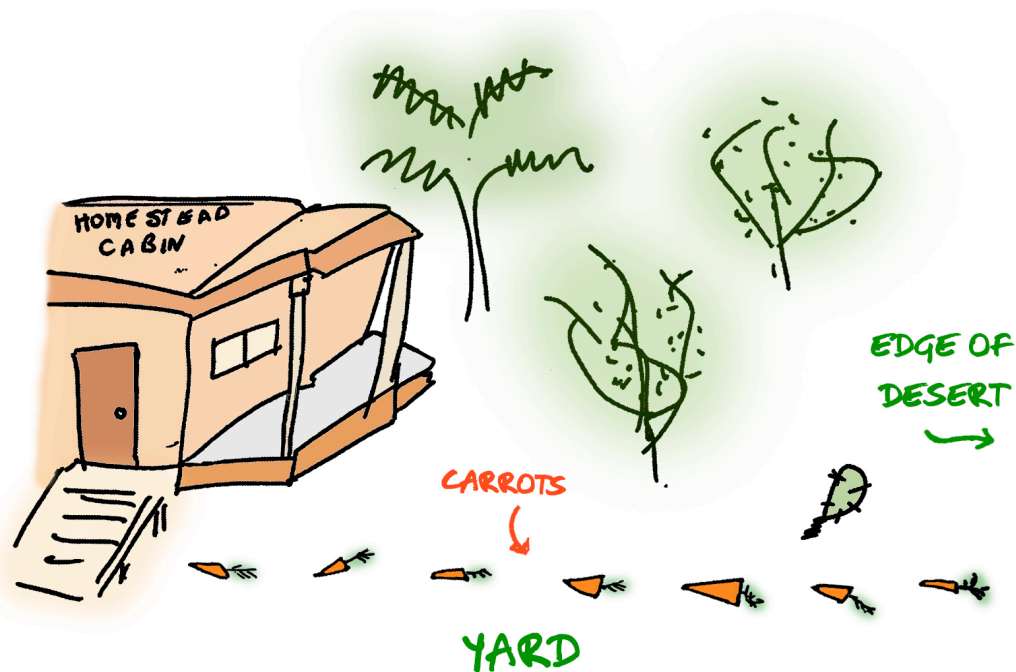
When the various rabbits showed up in my yard, I did not know the specifics of the various breeds of the rabbits. But I was no stranger to “wild animals” in general. Hell, I lived on a golf course for 30 years. Out my front window I could see bunnies eating/trimming my Home Owner’s Association-approved petunias. Out on the back deck it was common to see Mr. Coyote carrying a duck take-home dinner back to his den on the edge of the desert. We had raccoons and roadrunners knocking on the sliding door for a protein meal. There was a nightly aroma of skunk following their garbage run. Did I mention the Canadian geese? Don’t get me started.

When I bought my Joshua Tree homestead cabin back in 1999 I was aware, during my weekly weekend visits, that there was some animal activity around my place. In fact my first weekend there I thought I saw a small pig roaming around my acreage. It turned out to be a neighbor’s pot-belly pig that routinely escaped his pen. The sound of coyotes yelping at sunset always got my attention. A large bevy of quail passed through my yard each day looking for seeds, I suppose. An occasional rabbit could be seen in the distance—moving from the cover of a creosote bush to the shade of a Joshua Tree. Since my cabin was vacant most of the week and there was no source of water at the time, there was not much reason for an animal to linger in my yard.

A year later when city water came in, I promptly installed a timer irrigation system and planted trees, rose bushes and cacti. I found out later even the cacti required regular watering. Water, of course, brought some rabbits. But as soon as I opened the cabin door they would run away. I recalled from vague childhood memories that rabbits always seemed to be tied in with carrots. So I thought, maybe I could attract rabbits with carrots. Before I could put a specific plan into action, I encountered a lady at the grocery checkout stand with a 25-pound bag of carrots. I asked her if she used all those carrots to feed her horses. (I had also remembered

from childhood that there was some connection between horses and carrots—or was that apples?) No, she replied: rabbits, I can't keep up with them.

So, of course, I bought a 99-cent bag of carrots (didn't want to overdo it) and took it home. I took the carrot sticks out of the bag, cut them in chunks and laid out a trail of carrots from the edge of my property to my cabin door. The next weekend when I came out to Joshua Tree for my visit, all the carrots were still lying on the ground where I had placed them—untouched.

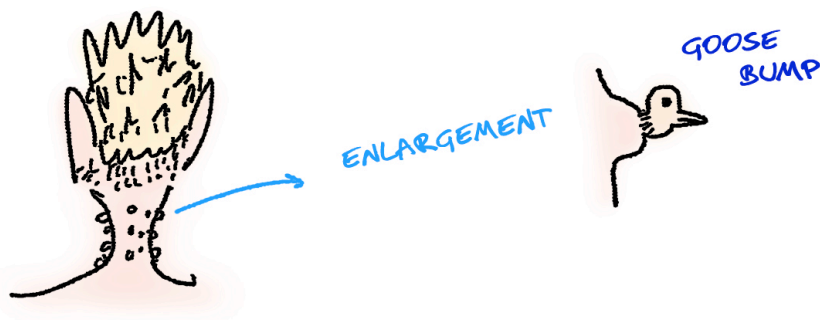


Maybe these wild rabbits don't know about carrots. So in the following weeks I tried whole carrots with the green tassel attached, apple slices, zucchini slices and corn on the cob. A cute squirrel stood up on his hind legs, flicked his tail and expressed interest in the apple slices. The corn on the cob was still out there a week later. Obviously, I was a failure at luring animals into my yard. I abandoned the project at that time and focused on other matters.

So let's jump ahead to 2016. I had by this time moved in full-time to my cabin. By June of 2016 we had been experiencing years of drought conditions with seven

months of no rain—living under mandatory water restrictions as well. With no rainfall, the fields of natural grass had disappeared. The leaves of the creosote bush (a main food source for rabbits) had turned brown and fallen off and blown away.

On that June 2016 evening I was taking my usual after dinner hike around my property, checking my irrigation system, making sure everything was getting enough water. My property is on hill with a pretty good slope so I got some good exercise as well on my walk. I was on a well-worn path when I heard rustling sounds ahead. From behind a creosote bush came a cloud of dust. When the dust settled, there revealed was a rabbit with very big ears that had screeched to a halt five feet in front of me. His ears were still flapping back and forth from his rapid deceleration. I asked myself, is this normal rabbit behavior? Do they confront people in this way? Do they bite? I got goose bumps on my neck!

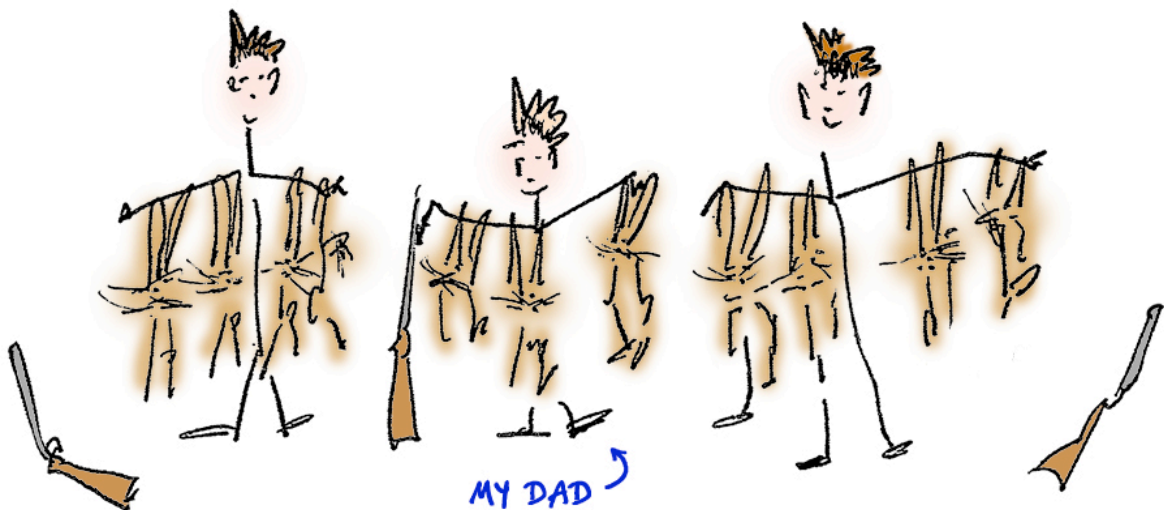


We both held our position on the path.

By the way, when I'm doing my rounds, I always carry apple slices (after-dinner dessert items). We were eyeing each other. I was looking at him. He was looking at my apple slices, I'm sure. Since I needed to be on my way (I always have a lot of things to do), I asked him verbally if he would like an apple slice. He did not move, so I stepped off the path to go around him. My action prompted him into action—up the slope and out of sight he went. Since all this occurred over a year ago, pardon my exact memory, and I cannot believe I was such an easy mark at the time, but I probably left an apple slice on the ground for him.

That evening I do vividly recall rushing back to my cabin to search my small bookshelf to see if I had any books on desert wildlife identification. In my introduction I stated I would not be doing any official research, but this was a first and unexpected contact. It was an emergency—I needed to know what kind of rabbit I was dealing with. I found a field guide to Owens Valley—a similar high desert valley to the North of us. On page 195 there was an excellent ink pen illustration of my guy: the black-tailed jackrabbit with big ears. On page 92, my more distant and infrequent rabbit visitors were identified as desert cotton-tails, though they did not rate a picture! Huh. OK, I'm really done with research (I'll just look at the pictures, Mom).

With the above information I could put my encounter with a jackrabbit in proper historical perspective. Starting with my own family history, as a semi-urban kid, I was fascinated and somewhat alarmed by photos of my Dad and his two brothers in their youth holding by their ears many dead jackrabbits.



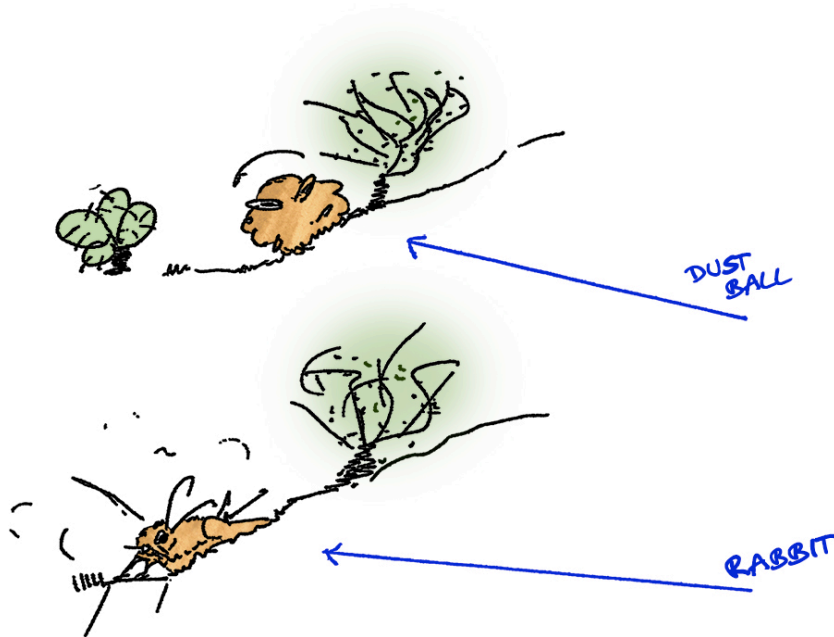
When I asked my father about the pictures he said the rabbits were pests at the family's mountain summer home and added that they were “no good to eat.”

As a student of western ranching, farming and homesteading history, I am well aware of the sad record of those people dealing with the scourge of rabbits, crickets and other pests attacking their marginal crops. They were trying to raise plants on

poor land with no guarantee of nature's unpredictable water supply. You can understand their mentality of shoot first, ask questions later.

I get it. Jackrabbits have terrible reputations. But maybe mine will be an exception, if there are exceptions. "Good luck, Jer," you say.

Back to our story. The next evening, I was walking the same path toward our initial encounter spot—with apple slices, of course. Just past that spot, the jackrabbit made another sliding/braking appearance, but with a little less dust this time. His aim was better, too. He stopped right in the middle of the path and held his position four feet away.



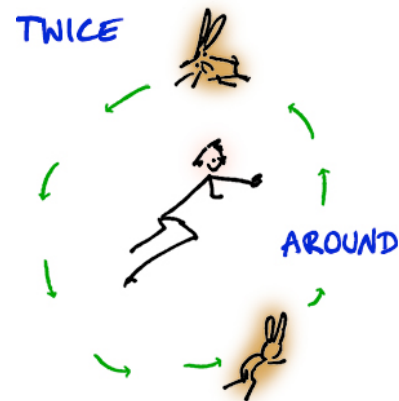
To avoid appearing too tall or threatening and to get down to his level, I crouched down on my bare knees, stretched out my body, and extended my arm and hands out to narrow the distance between us. He moved from his spot and as he approached me, he stretched his body way out too, but instead of going toward my hand, he began to circle around me at a safe distance.



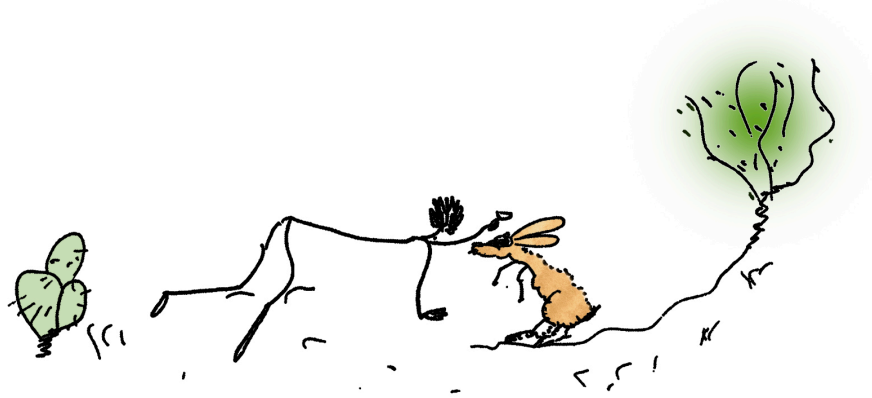
Now he was going behind me. Due to my outstretched position, I could not turn my head around far enough to see what he was doing back there! I saw him next at my right hip. And then he was in front of me. Did I mention goose bumps—double goose bumps? But he didn't stop; he started circling again. What was he looking for? A hidden gun or club?

He finished his circling, but by this time, due to having held my awkward position for so long, I had to move my body. I moved; he took off. He's kind of skittish you might say! I left apple slices on the path. I knew I was breaking my own rule (the "don't let him push you around" rule), but we seemed to be making progress here.

The next evening he was waiting for me on the path. I will refer to this spot as our official encounter spot. This night I only had two apple slices because I had already eaten the rest (kind of forgot about him, sorry). So after I made the usual offer—down on my knees—he approached my hand within inches of my fingers. Again he veered to the left (I was holding my body up with my right arm), but instead of circling around me



he began to sniff me, to smell my fingers, my hand, my arm back to my elbows. I could feel his little whiskers on my skin. Triple, triple goose bumps.



After determining to his satisfaction as to where my human body parts ended and the apple slice began, he carefully took the apple slice from my fingertips and then went up the slope to finish it off. Wow! That was really neat, and he didn't bite my fingers off! Looking back on the episode, we both had a lot of faith in each other's good behavior. And I did not pull out that club.

So with the vetting process over, our feeding procedure became a nightly routine. Ignoring past histories of human/rabbit conflicts, our encounter on the pathway made



history for me and I'm sure for the rabbit. I never expected this interaction to occur but realized it gave me an opportunity to observe this interesting animal at close quarters, a foot and a half away. I'll call these initial encounter times together our honeymoon period. During this time together, I couldn't help but notice a few things.

First, he is really pretty. The variety in the texture and color of his fur coat is extraordinary. You got browns, tans, blacks and whites and on the bottom of his paws a fine fringe of buckskin-colored fur. Look at those ears with their almost purple velveteen finish! Speaking of those ears—they are really long. You will notice the inner part of the ear is almost transparent (see page 14). You can see the arteries and veins coursing through the pink membrane. Another feature of note are the eyes. Those big, beautiful spooky eyes; something bothered me about the eyes from the start; I could not figure out what it was for some time. Then it hit me—no blinking, no eyelids!



When I thought about it, blinking conveys so much information. It offers an emotional element to most situations. I think if the jackrabbit had the ability to blink, it would soften his image and improve his reputation. So God (if you're listening), next time, add some blinkers. Check out the nose, too. The nose is a transparent membrane or sack that is covered with tiny fine hairs. You can see right

through it to the structures below—his upper lip and cheek whiskers and the nose is in constant motion except when he is asleep, but that’s a story for later.



Getting back to my rabbit friend and our initial encounters, they were precipitated by dire environmental conditions—no natural water (rain), no food (plant life) in the vicinity. Notice the picture of my yard. It looks like the National Geographic pictures of the surface of Mars (minus my foot and bobcat and coyote tracks).

EXCERPTS

READERS' LETTERS

Jayne & Paul Shienfeld

The Coach House, Crowsley Road, Lower Shiplake, Oxon RG9 3JT

Jerry Smetts
P.O. Box 540
Joshua Tree CA 92252

September 23, 2017

Dear Jerry,

We have so enjoyed your Nine Months, both the story and illustrations.

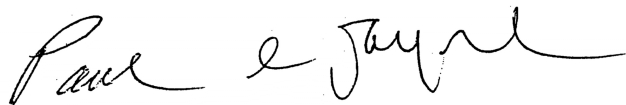
It may not have taken us nine months to send this acknowledgement, but it must be close to nine weeks since we received and read your memoir.

By now you should know from those with whom you have already shared it, it is special.

As you already have seen via our 'I spy...' email to Elliot our sensitivity to the presence of any and all rabbits is now greatly enhanced. Their introduction to the island of Lewis & Harris in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland and the subsequent extensive burrowing is now causing great stress to that island's ecology.

Thanks again and good luck with your on going vigil and adventures.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Paul & Jayne". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned at the bottom of the letter, below the typed "Best regards,".

12-18-17

Dear Jerry,

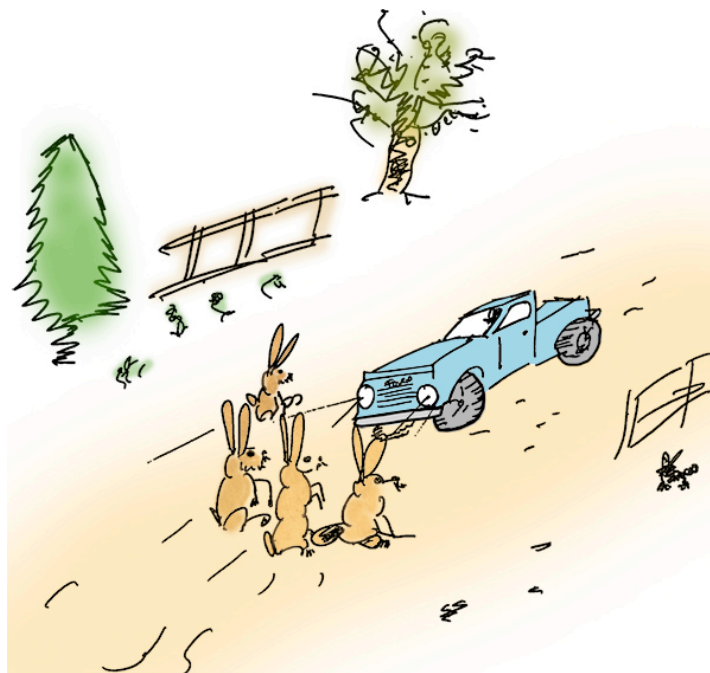
Enjoyed your sage of cottontails, Jackrabbits & Jerry! Found myself laughing out loud several times, thinking about your three-point feeding stance.

What a great job of reality writing! Your friendship with these very wild but wonderful critters of God's creation is truly special. A good lesson on how all living things respond in positive ways to acts of kindness. There is a lot to be learned from your experience.

Wow! You are a very dedicated writer. I probably wouldn't have gotten past the first page before I ran out of ideas and writing energy.

Maybe you can tell me why on my driveway the Jackrabbits (sort) play an insane game of chicken? They see how long they can wait before running out in front of the on coming vehicle. Have you noticed a suicidal inclination in these little jaywalkers?





Rabbits in a game of chicken

Dear Reader,

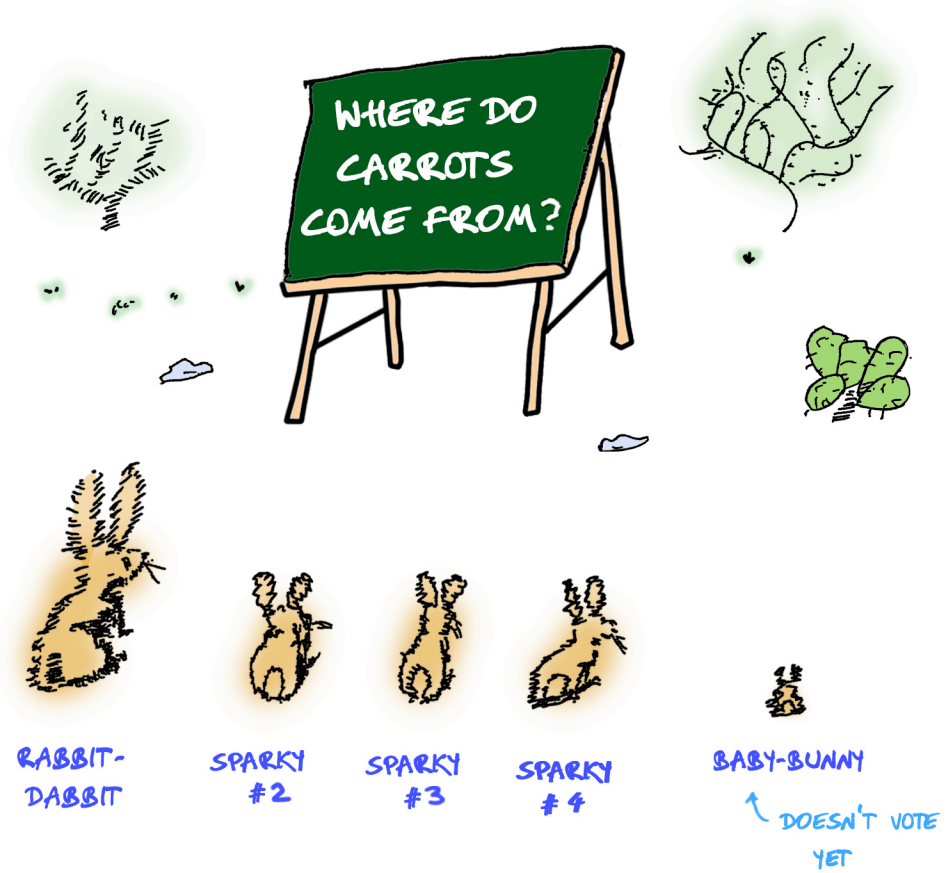
So you have jackrabbit problems. Join the crowd! They are a smart, observant and a problem-solving bunch. I hope you are not feeding them because that complicates things. In simple terms, they are guarding your property—they fancy themselves as guard rabbits. When they get in front of your car, get out and tell them you appreciate their concern but any car you or your family is driving gets a free pass. If a stranger enters, have at it!

Next you tell them that if they want to be on your property, they have to follow certain rules. Rule One is to “stay out of our way.” If you (the jackrabbits) force us to stop, our cars will be equipped with *spray water bottles*. Jackrabbits hate getting wet—it’s one of the worst thing that can happen to them. The jackrabbits will respond with threats of never coming back again. Ignore those threats. They are just a bunch of spoiled, large-assed pussy cats.

There are other tools you can use like air horns or gunshots in the air, but the water spray to the face is the most efficient. It also has the added benefit of not scaring other animals. Good luck!

EXCERPTS

MORE ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE BOOK



MULTIPLE GUESS RESULTS :

FROM JERRY IIII
FROM THE STORE II
FROM THE GROUND I ? ICK!
FROM THE TRADER JOE BOO! NO WAY!

← VOTES

HAD BAD EXPERIENCE
WITH ORGANIC
CARROTS -- SLIMEY!

THE PANORAMIC EYE SIGHT OF RABBITS

Rabbits can see in a nearly 360° circle of vision

How is this possible?

BACK END VIEW

What you are looking at:
Well, for one thing, the rear end of a jackrabbit



Protruding eyes: visible through notches in their skull to allow almost 360°, panoramic vision

Ears: tucked back along the back to dump the wind from sail-like ears

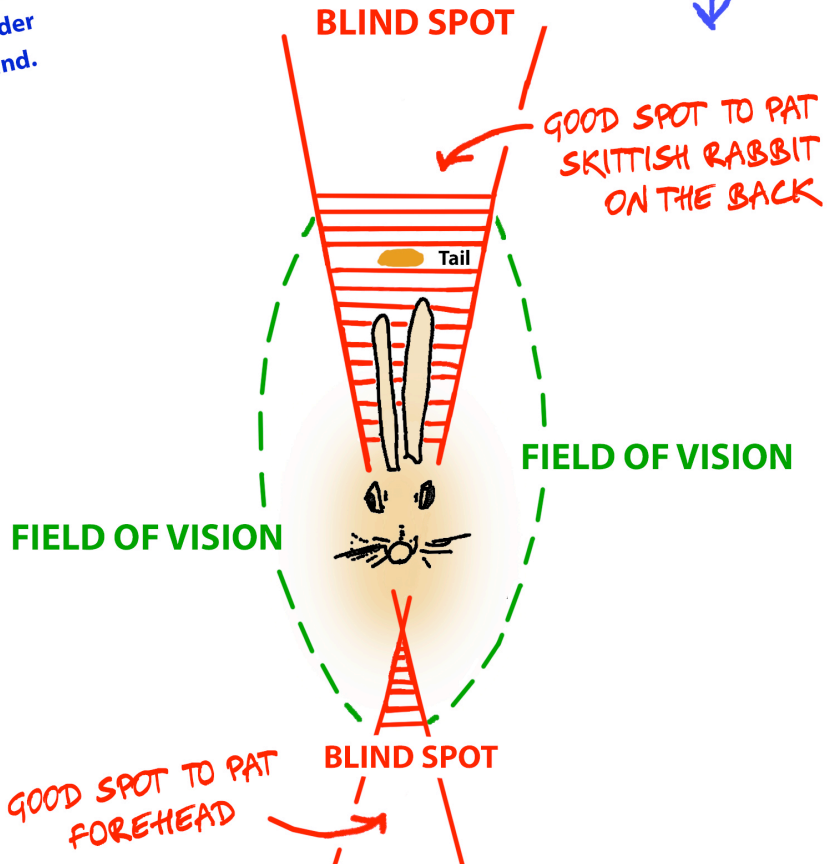
AERIAL VIEW

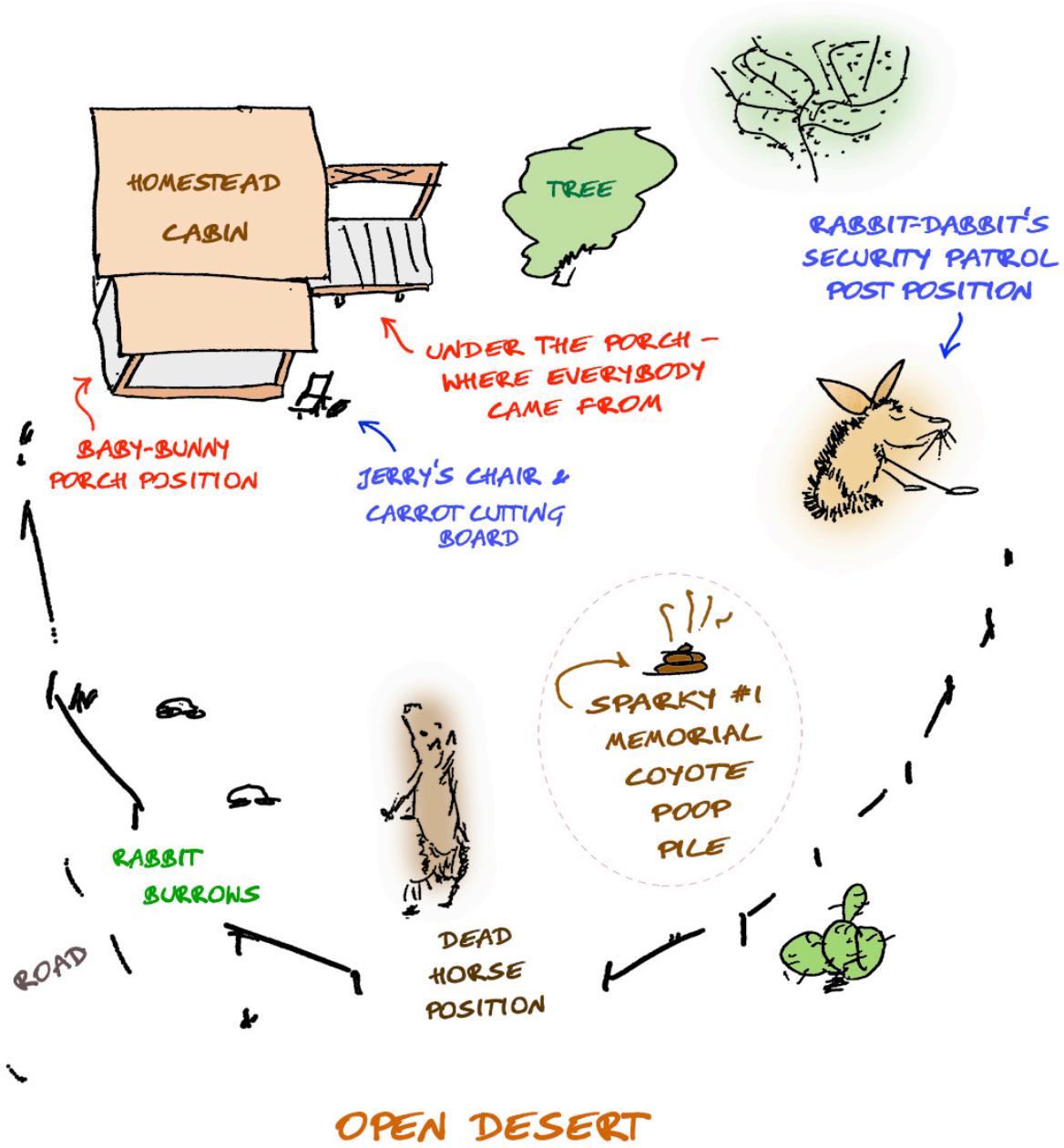
But with that Big 'Ol fish-eye lens eyeball, the world and me look pretty distorted and I wonder why they even stuck around.



PRETTY SCAREY!

WIND DIRECTION





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