

SOURPUSS FOREVER



JERRY SMETTS PHOTO

“Those big, beautiful, spooky eyes; something bothered me about the eyes from the start,” Jerry Smetts writes in his book, above this photo of one of his rabbit visitor. “Then it hit me — no blinking, no eyelids!”

Jerry Smetts' lessons from a life lived with rabbits

By Stacy Moore
Basin Wide Spirit

I met a rabbit and then I met more rabbits. One rabbit led to another.”

The first group of rabbits arrived at Jerry Smetts' Joshua Tree homestead cabin around June 1, 2016.

“When they arrived, they were desperate — it had not rained for seven months,” he would later write.

“They were skinny — their fur coats were ragged and probably flea-bitten. They were a mess. When they entered my yard that day, I had no idea at the time that when they packed up and left nine months later, they would be fat and pest-free, with fur coats shining — each beautiful specimens of their three distinctive breeds.”

Smetts' first face-to-face encounter happened with a black-tailed jackrabbit as he walked around his property after dinner. He 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?”

Smetts had some apple slices in his pocket for dessert. Naturally, he asked the jackrabbit if it would like some.

The rabbit declined and took off. But Smetts' curiosity was sparked.

**OUTDOOR
ADVENTURES**

The next evening, in the same spot, the jackrabbit slid to a stop by him again, four feet away. Smetts crouched on the ground and stretched out his hands and the jackrabbit did the same. The hare circled him twice before hopping away.

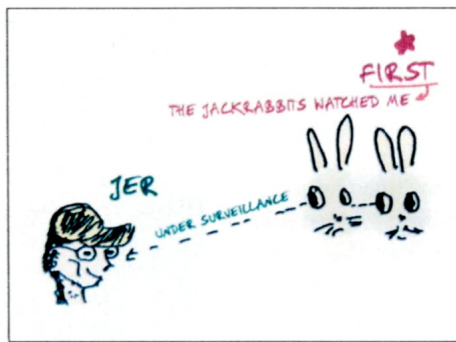
The third night, the rabbit began to sniff Smetts as he crouched on the ground holding out an apple slice. "I could feel his little whiskers on my skin."

The jackrabbit carefully took the apple slice and moved up a slope to enjoy it.

"Looking back on that episode, we both had a lot of faith in each other's good behavior."

Smetts and the jackrabbit settled into a nightly routine. He got the chance to observe the creature's shaded fur, almost purple velveteen ears, and "those big, beautiful, spooky eyes."

He named his new friend the Drama King because he was very picky about the cleanliness of the apple slices (no dirt) and required Smetts to kneel before he would approach. Smetts also switched to carrots so he wouldn't have to crouch as low. The carrots had to be peeled.



JERRY SMETTS ILLUSTRATION

A sketch by Jerry Smetts shows how he and the jackrabbits observed each other.

"About two or three months into it, a rabbit came up to me and said, 'Jer, have you ever eaten a carrot that hasn't been peeled? It's sour,'" Smetts said.

One evening, another rabbit showed up and accepted a carrot. By August, he was feeding four jacks and an ever-changing drove of cottontails. He eventually realized one of those wasn't a cottontail at all, but a once-captive chinchilla now surviving in the wild. He learned the cottontails and chinchilla would never get too close to him, not like the jacks.

Smetts continued to carefully observe his diners, noting their behaviors and quirks.

"I had rules they had to follow. No eating other rabbits' carrots and so on," he said.

"Our communication was very complex."

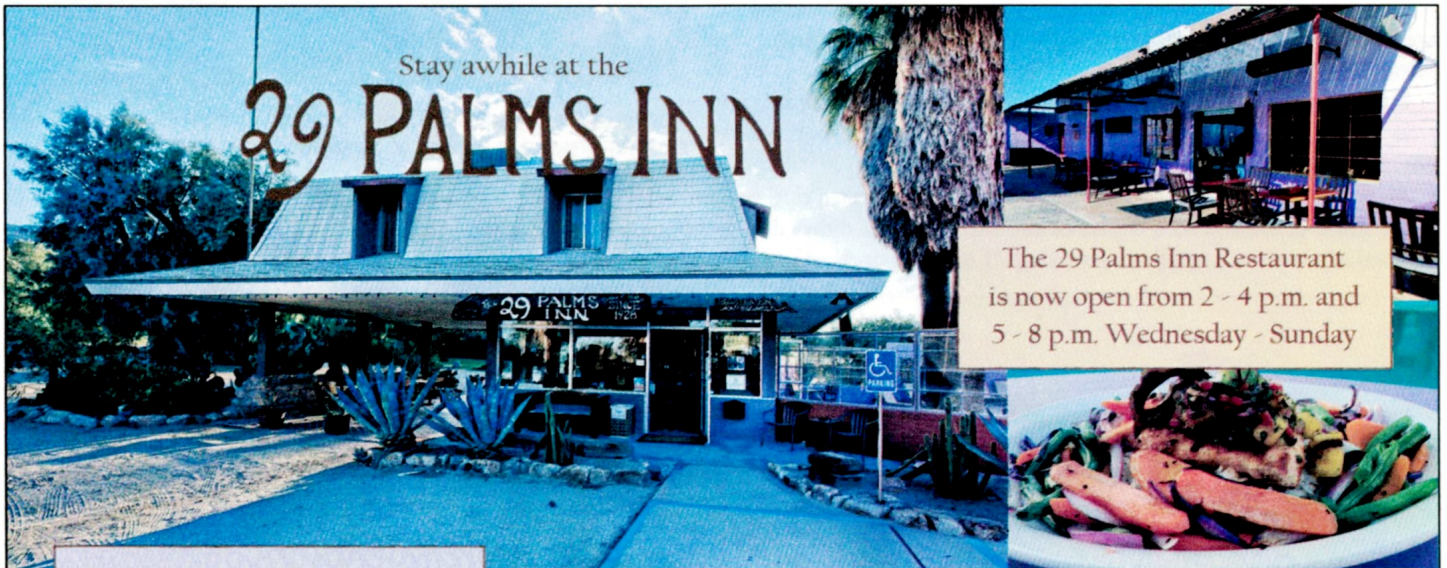
Smetts named the chinchilla Bruizer for its bellicose attitude, and his favorite jackrabbit he called Rabbit Dabbit.

"I had to run off competitors and predators all the time. We worked together. In the process, these rabbits developed manners," he said.

Months later, Smetts had seen a world of rabbit drama — disappearances, fights and friendships. His original Drama King disappeared and then reappeared months later "a changed rabbit." He followed all the rules and got along with the others, and Smetts responded by renaming him Sourpuss.

He also grappled with whether he was doing the right thing in feeding and interacting with these wild animals.

He read a New York Times article that



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said people spend \$3 billion a year on wildlife feed (not counting Smetts' apples and carrots). "People want to connect with nature and animals," he realized. "In most cases they are providing food that is supplementing the seasonal variations of the animals' natural diet."

He also asked if he was putting himself in a position of control over the animals. But he reflected on how the rabbits trained him on what they would eat and how. "As you can see from this story, it wasn't too long before my rabbits were fully in control of where, when and how much they ate," he wrote. "I rest my case."

Or as he wrote in another part of the book, "I promise not to feed the bears, coyotes or mountain lions. With everyone else it's negotiable."

Smetts began talking about his experiences with others in the desert.

"Other people wanted to meet the rabbits, but the rabbits were too scared," he said.

So Smetts started making photo cards to send to the rabbit fans. He shared photos of Sourpuss' antics with the Hi-Desert Star. He made little photo books featuring pictures of Rabbit Dabbit and Sourpuss with captions. Then he started collecting them into stories. He started by writing his ideas and making sketches on paper.

He used a camera to take photographs too, but when feeding the rabbits, he couldn't use his hands for anything else so he started drawing them afterward.

Eventually, he compiled his writing, sketches and photographs into a book. That book became the first part of a longer work, titled "What the Rabbits Taught Me: The Creosote Bush Chronicles."

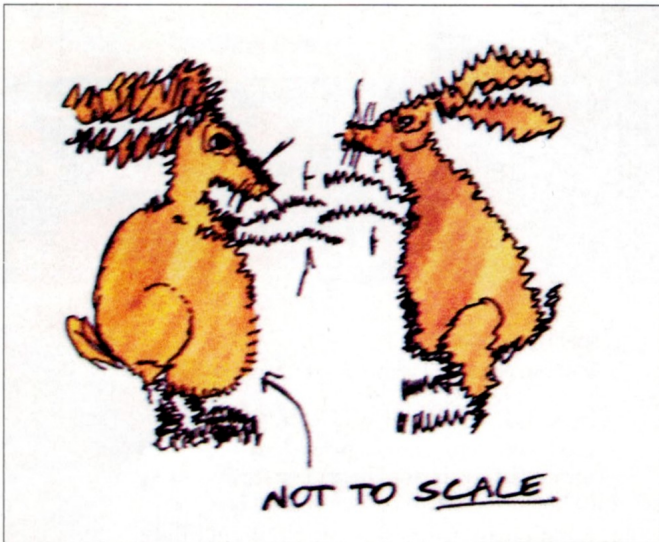
He turned to Melanie Pahlmann at Lucid Design Studios to have the work colored and bound. It was published this year, and is available at local stores.

Formerly a chiropractor and property manager, Smetts said he didn't think of himself as a writer before. In school, he didn't do particularly well in English and writing. "I couldn't understand



JERRY SMETTS PHOTO

Sourpuss the jackrabbit, as featured in the Hi-Desert Star. Smetts shared a photo of Sourpuss (formerly Drama King) enjoying a pile of carrots.



JERRY SMETTS ILLUSTRATION

Drama King gets into a scuffle with another jackrabbit, as depicted by Jerry Smetts in his book.



JERRY SMETTS PHOTO

Baby-Bunny is introduced with a photograph in Jerry Smetts' book, "What the Rabbits Taught Me."

Shakespeare. ... I was a daydreamer. I liked gazing out the big windows in the classroom."

He wasn't an artist either: "I was never a doodler."

But now he is both author and artist, and the proof is in a 231-page book. Smetts tells with wonder and affection about the animals and their adventures. He's also a natural scientist, deducing facts about animal behavior and physiology through observation.

He reports on what he learned from books and articles about rabbits and also his own metaphysical conclusions — like his list of ways that rabbits and humans are similar. It includes:

- Hesitation on initial encounter.
- Competitive with others.
- Musing that often provides no clear answer.
- Mourning the death of a fellow rabbit.
- Outwitting Jerry at every turn.

The book's narrative is garnished with his drawings of his rabbit friends — Sourpuss, Rabbit Dabbit, Bruizer, Prancers and



JERRY SMETTS PHOTO

Prancer-Dancer the cottontail is pictured in Jerry Smetts' book "What the Rabbits Taught Me."

others.

Smetts reports on his findings on everything from the different species' ability to form a community in a way that humans

still struggle with, to the question of whether animals have souls. Considering the joy he has seen them take in friendships with each other and their mourning behavior at the death of one of their number, his answer is emphatically yes, all rabbits go to heaven.

Receiving boxes of his own books, ready for distribution, he said, was "just the most rewarding feeling."

"My message to potential authors — which everyone is — we have this idea of writers like Hemingway, tortured, throwing manuscripts away. It doesn't have to be that way," he said.

"I didn't discover my passion and creativity till I was 62-ish. It just changes your whole world. It keeps you busy. The fastest hour of my life is when I'm writing."

Smetts is now working on his second book, in which he will share with illustrations others' stories about their encounters with nature. His invitation: "Everyone has a rabbit, coyote or Joshua tree story. Tell me yours."

"What the Rabbits Taught Me" is available at local stores and at dabbitpress.com.

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