

Rabbits suffer animal cruelty on black market

By Leslie Sykes

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES (KABC) -- It's a crime that's committed every day in downtown Los Angeles: animal cruelty. Baby bunnies just a few days old are sold on street corners by illegal animal vendors. The bunnies are kept in filthy conditions. Many are sick or dying when they're sold. Police and animal activists trying to stop this practice.

A baby bunny draws its last breaths, dying because it was taken from its mother too soon.

It's a scene that plays out over and over again, a story that begins on the streets of downtown L.A.

Performing a raid, Los Angeles Police officers arrest an animal vendor. The haul? Twenty-two bunnies, 10 birds and 40 baby turtles.

"The rabbits will be lucky if they live past four days," said LAPD officer Matt Shafer. "The turtles, some of them live, some of them die, but the majority of them are all covered in salmonella."

"Their eyes start getting open when they're seven days old, and you can see they're barely open right now," said Lejla Hadzimuratovic, founder of Bunny World Foundation.

Hadzimuratovic is "The Bunny Lady." She's put her life on hold, taking in some 800 baby bunnies confiscated by police on the streets of L.A. over the past two years.

"Why do I do this? Because no one else does," said Hadzimuratovic. "I love bunnies, I totally love bunnies and these guys have stolen my heart."

Hadzimuratovic took Eyewitness News out to downtown's Fashion District on another day, without police.

But every time the vendors see the camera, they quickly wrap the animals up inside black plastic bags and take off. The animal vendors know Hadzimuratovic now.

In fact, several vendors attacked her once when she tried to videotape their activities.

But Hadzimuratovic won't back down. She returns to downtown L.A. day after day.

"Now children will buy this baby and it will die the next day because it needs milk," said Hadzimuratovic.

We follow Hadzimuratovic to her home. It's an intensive-care unit of sorts for rescued bunnies.

On this day, Hadzimuratovic has 74 bunnies in all. She nurses the sick ones back to health, feeding them special formula with a syringe.

Dr. Sari Kanfer is a veterinarian who sees the results of the illegal bunny trade.

"I see people come in with a bunny less than the size of my palm that is dehydrated, barely moving, cold to the touch," said Kanfer. "I have to break the news to the parents and the child that your baby bunny is dying."

That's what happened to Meighan Cardenas of Sierra Madre.

Cardenas bought bunnies "George" and "Ringo," not realizing they were too young to be separated from their mother.

"They did fine for a couple days, my girls loved playing with them," said Cardenas. "Oh, they were just so sweet. After a couple days they started getting really sick, Ringo especially."

Ringo didn't make it.

"The worst was when my daughter woke up and said, 'Mommy, Ringo's not moving, what's wrong with him?' It was very sad," said Cardenas.

Since then, Cardenas has taken in several rescued bunnies.

As for George? "And now he's 5 months old and he's doing great," said Cardenas.

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