

THE ARGENTE FAMILY

by Peter Smith

Introduction

I wrote a few articles for the National Argente Yearbook back in around 2000, for each of the colours that were standardised at that time, namely the Bleu, Crème, Champagne and Brun. Thanks to the National Argente Club's secretary, Laurel Thompson, my articles have been made available to me again and given that I've nothing else to do rabbit wise for the next four months, and been promising *Fur & Feather* some articles on Argentes for I don't know how long, I have updated these, as many of the Club's newer members, or those potentially interested in starting out in Argentes will never have seen them before.

The articles for each of the colours, which will hopefully appear in these pages in the next few months are based on my own experiences of keeping them for over 40 years and from picking the brains of my father, Stephen, who has kept Bleus continuously since the 1960s. During that time, all six colours have passed through our sheds.



Argente Bleu

History

The silverware of the National Argente Club has been decorated by some great names during the 1950's, 60's and 70's when the Argente had its strongest following. Messrs. Comber, Langley, Toyne, Donson and Mason are synonymous with quality Bleus during this period.

More recently, over the last thirty years up until around the mid-00s, whilst numbers dwindled, the quality of stock remained high and during that time the Argente achieved its best ever placing in *Fur & Feather's* Review of the Year league table and Bleus were bred by exhibitors who have topped the Exhibitor of the Year list, namely Arrands & Paull and Blacksmith Stud. These two studs, in various guises, were the main breeders of Bleus and dominated the stock show honours in the 80s, 90s and 00s.



Whilst Ivor Paull still shows, Dennis Arrand sadly passed away and his son Rob left the Fancy some years ago.

It is fair to say that both of these studs have supplied numerous people with quality stock, many of whom were never heard of again, which is a pity, as the Bleu, on song, is a picture to behold.

So, what has been my fascination with this breed for the last forty plus years. The fact that I was born into them obviously played its part, with regular trips to stock shows as a child, usually at Barnetby, Peterborough and the wonderful British Timken Show. I think I only went along at the start to avoid going to Church with my mother!

However, I think part of the fascination comes from the colour change that is unique to the Argente. Slowly but surely, as the weeks progress, the silvering effect commences.

The first places to start are usually the nose and tips of the toes. The coat then starts to break and if blown into you will be able to see the silver hairs coming through the skin.

The silvering effect arises as a result of the loss of pigment in the tips of the coat, as the base colour remains the same as its infant self-colour. The physiological action producing this loss of pigment in the coat tips is not understood. It may be something to do with their original natural



Peter Smith (right)

environment and be some form of camouflage to enable the survival of the fittest.

Nevertheless, it is a fascinating process to watch and each rabbit silvers up in a different way.

There seem to be two distinct silvering processes. The first, and most usual one, is that the colour comes through reasonably evenly and the rabbit is in its full adult coat by the age of 3 to 4 months and keeps this until around 7 months.

It then moults through again, whereby the undercolour usually fades and the rabbit is condemned to the breeding pen. These rabbits usually make the best youngsters, but have a habit of moulting early in their adult stages.

The second stage is one that arises occasionally and is a process that I call double moulting. The initial silvering is very fine and commences at an early age.

These rabbits look very dark, looking almost like a Silver, and they do not have the required top colour at this stage. This fine silvering process is usually completed by around 10 to 11 weeks, after which the rabbit moults again shortly afterwards and then does come into full adult coat with the desired top colour around 5 months old.

Obviously, these rabbits do not make the grade as youngsters for showing, but do tend to have an extended show life as an adult and carry full coats for quite a while longer. I've also found that they tend to come with far better top colour and clarity of ticking.

This process is much more prevalent these days than in times gone by, in particular for those Argente colours that have had continental blood introduced into them. That makes sense, as rabbits on the continent tend to be shown principally as adults, as opposed to youngsters, and longevity of coat life seems a sensible key feature to promote.

The question I am often asked when selling stock to the untrained eye is how do I pick out the good from the bad. As you can see from the above, a flashy youngster is not always a good long-term bet for success. Therefore, it is desirable to keep a mixture of stock.

Type

I've said it before and I'll say it again, without type you haven't got a rabbit. It is the framework upon which all the other requirements hang and is apportioned 30 points in the standard. Almost as soon as youngsters emerge from the nest, you can tell whether you have the requisite type.

Essentially, around the 4 weeks old stage, you are looking for a cobby rabbit, with a good broad head, short ears, broad shoulders, well-rounded hindquarters, a short coupled body and with fitness. If it's not fit when its been suckling on its mother, it is unlikely to progress once it is weaned.

Rangy bodied, long eared and narrow headed youngsters will not make the grade. They may be reared on out of interest (or desperation), but my theory is that a weakling, runt or poor specimen only deprives the good ones of more nourishment. Therefore, I would be likely to discard it. I don't keep litters of more than four and I think three is the ideal number.

As the young rabbit develops it should fill out in proportion. Occasionally you will get one whereby its ears grow quickly and eventually its body catches up, but usually development is fairly uniform.

It is imperative that when the young Argente hits the showbench that it is in good condition, firm in flesh, as without fitness, it is very difficult for an Argente, or any other breed for that matter, to compete.

Type does vary between bucks and does. In the bucks, we are looking for a broader head and a well-rounded body, with the weight being approximately six pounds.

In the does, a finer head is the case, but a snipey head should be avoided. Again, we are looking for a well-rounded body. My experience is that does will be slightly longer in barrel than the bucks, due to mother nature and all that entails when youngsters develop in the womb. They are also more susceptible to middle-aged spread.

Once does lose their show coats, which is around 7 to 8 months old, I do keep them lean. Fat does do not breed regularly and are more at risk of pregnancy toxemia. Therefore, once the doe has

finished her show life I will let her lose some condition before mating, in order that during pregnancy she is rising into condition.

Colour

The colouring process that the Argente undergoes is not only unique, but totally misunderstood as to how or why it occurs. There are other rabbits that change colour in order to adapt to their natural environment, such as Arctic Hares, which are white in the winter months (for camouflage purposes) and then return to an agouti colour in the summer months. How and why a self-coloured rabbit at birth changes colour during its early months has baffled many experts.

As the youngsters emerge, they are a dark blue colour from head to tail with the same undercolour all the way down to the skin. Any with a white base at this age should be discarded as they will not make the grade on the showbench, nor should they be used for breeding.

At around the four-week stage you will see the nose and tips of toes starting to sprout silver hairs and so it goes on over the entire body.

It does not occur uniformly. However, the usual order of events is broadly the feet, belly, nose, tail, flanks, saddle, ears and eventually the head and nape - though it could be the entire opposite on some occasions.

As the new colour and coat come through, we have two colours to combine. These being the top colour and the undercolour.

Dealing with the top colour first. This should be a bluish white interspersed moderately with longer dark blue hairs (known as ticking).

What constitutes bluish white? Well it's not white, with little or no ticking, as these exhibits are considered too light and should be faulted, yet it's not a blue cast, usually caused by too much ticking.

So, what is it? The only way to have in one's mind what correct colour is, is to speak with experienced Argente breeders and attend stock shows, where the finer points of winners and losers can be explained.

Some of the older fanciers would say a skimmed milk colour. Bringing this article into the 21st century, if those interested type 'blue skimmed milk' into Google you get a picture of a glass of bluish milk which is about the right shade.

The top colour should be an even shade across the entire rabbit; there are ten points in the standard for this. Dark muzzles, ears and even tails detract from this and should be penalized on the show bench.

Undercolour also has many shades. The standard says lavender blue. What is this?

I would say lavender blue is the colour of a slightly dark Blue Beveren, as the required colour for them is light lavender blue. Too dark undercolour would be more of dark blue associated again with say a Blue Vienna and a too light a shade is a pale insipid colour, some would say wishy washy, that has no solidness or depth about it. This should extend as far down to the skin as possible.

A white band at the base of the undercolour is very undesirable and should be penalised. Such rabbits should not be used for breeding as once this band is in place it is very difficult to breed out.

Also, the undercolour should be of one shade throughout, again with no variation from the top to the bottom.

Within the realm of colour comes the issue of white toenails. The standard says that this is a minor fault. How should this be interpreted? Is it one or ten white toenails that constitute a minor fault?



Argente Bleu

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As the standard also says, toe nails to be coloured, I would suggest that one white toe nail is a minor fault, two a bit more and so on - as for ten then I think that this has moved into a more serious one and the rabbit should be penalised accordingly. These tend to only be on the front feet.

My view is that two rabbits that are very similar with one having no white toe nails and the other one then I would use this to differentiate - however, if we have one with one white nail that is some way ahead of the next exhibit I would not consider it sufficient a fault for them to change places. Nevertheless, I feel that judges should always look - they often don't.

Coat

The Argente Bleu's coat is not a typical fur rabbit's coat. Whilst it should be dense, silky and flowing, it is nothing like a Silver Fox's coat, for density or length and nor should it be.

The coat should be about three quarters to one inch long and have a good even flow when a hand is run through it, with a little resistance.

There are many extremes when it comes to coat properties, ranging from too long to too short, too harsh to too soft and lacking density or too heavy coated (to the extent that the coat never clears). A balance between all of these being the ideal.

The only way to really appreciate what I am describing is to either visit a top breeder and handle their show stock or steward at one of the stock shows/five star shows and see what the winners look like; albeit that assumes that one with a decent coat on its back has won - which is not always the case!

Again, as the youngster develops it is reasonably easy to pick out those that have a good dense coat and those that have thin coats. The rump end usually silvers up first and a good feel of that at an early stage is a good indicator.

It is usually density that determines the good from bad, as within the breed texture is usually about right.

The length of coat cannot be assessed until the silvering process on the body has completed. Short-coated rabbits tend to lack texture, and long coated ones have too much, resulting in a soft coat. Thirty points once you've got that sorted.

Show preparation

Argentees tend to keep themselves relatively spick and span; however, you will get the odd scrat that will get itself dirty.

The secret is not to let this happen. Once the fur becomes stained it is very difficult to remove and can only be done by using soap and water. Any use of peroxides etc. tends to turn them orange!

I find that stained feet come up well with some witch hazel on some cotton wool or some net curtain whitener.

As it hits the showbench your Argente should sparkle, with the silver top colour giving a glossy gleaming effect. This is achieved largely through diet and

conditioning but can be brought to the fore by skilled grooming.

I know that Jenny Blanchard swears her rabbit's coats always feel better after I have handled them for around five minutes. I largely attribute this to having large hands that can span the entire rabbit's saddle, but also many years of getting rabbits ready for shows.

The secret, if there is one, is to get your hand deep into the coat and bring the natural oils of the coat to the surface in order to get the shine.

In doing this, rainwater on your hands helps. I collect mine in a barrel running off the rabbit shed roof.

I think Argentees are one of the easiest breeds to get ready for showing, providing you keep them clean, no white hairs or feet to deal with, no excessive grooming required and if well looked after, they keep themselves pretty fit.

Top honours

The benchmark for the quality of your stock are the National and Regional Stock Shows, together with Bradford and London, at which seasoned exhibitors attend, and are willing to point the beginner in the right direction.

However, as stock shows are not that frequent you will be more likely to find yourself at a local show. The views of National Argente Club's judges panel should be sought, as they have a good idea of what constitutes a good exhibit and what the shortcomings are.

Whilst the Argente has never been as successful as say Silver Foxes, Alaskas, Satins and New Zealands on the show bench, in recent years they have enjoyed plenty of success, in particular the St Huberts, which is encouraging and I hope will continue.

During my lifetime, the biggest wins I can recall Argentees having are BIS at the Cock o' the North Yorkshire Championship Show in the late 1960s with a Bleu, well done father, and Halloween Stud's St Hubert winning BIS at the 4* North East Championship Show. Both big shows, with well over 500 rabbits, and lovely to see, although I was in my pram for one of them.

They have also managed to get on the stage at the 5* star shows, with Jenny Blanchard winning the Normal Fur Ladies at Bradford and I had best Junior Fur at Bradford with a Bleu in 1981. So they can compete.

I would love to see an Argente win either Bradford or London - I've been waiting almost 50 years for this and I hope I don't have to wait another 50 to see it.

To be continued



Janice Calvert considers

The Role of The National Specialist Club

At our recent AGM I was charged with writing an article about membership of our National Specialist Club, the National Orange and Fawn Rex Rabbit Association with a view to encouraging people to become members.

Over the last year our membership has fallen from 85 to 63 and the number of hard core showing members is now down to about 10 people. Many of our members are ageing and new blood is urgently required.

Given that we have always been one of the stronger rex clubs, this has to now be a worry for the future of both the club and the breeds. So why is the National specialist Club a must?

Well, it brings breeders, exhibitors and judges together to provide a wealth of knowledge about the breed to those of you stepping onto the ladder of breeding and showing.

A good club will assist you in meeting other members with the same like minded interests and help you to gain knowledge and information from each other about the breed.

Our club has a system of area representatives which provides a point of contact for breeders in their local area to get help and advice. You will be introduced to other members at shows and have people to greet you upon arrival.

There can be no greater accolade than winning at your National Specialist Club Stock Show as you will be competing against people specialising in that breed and colour of rabbit.

For most breeders their Specialist Club Stock shows will be top their agenda and their entire breeding season will revolve around breeding stock ready for those shows. The club provides diplomas, rosettes and trophies to its members.

Our Club caters for both mini and standard rex that are orange and fawn in colour. So what advantages are there for mini rex breeders to join the club?

Well we are your specialist colour club and your rabbits will not only compete against other minis but also against standards of the same colour. The breed standard gives equal points for colour and coat and the club provides you with the opportunity of competing on an equal footing against the standards.

Our Club holds five stock shows a year, which we try and hold in the areas where members are based, so there is usually a show in your area. The club offers a championship scheme and provides diplomas for rabbits winning under club judges. We also run a points competition for adults and juniors throughout the year to compete for the best breeder and exhibitor within the club.

In an attempt to encourage new blood membership for juniors is completely free of charge. Just send in details of your address, age and breed to be registered on our membership list. Details of other membership costs are advertised in *Fur & Feather*.

We run a quarterly newsletter providing an update of results and with articles about specific aspects of our breed. If you notify us of your wins then these will be publicised on our facebook site: National Orange and Fawn Rex Rabbit Association.

Details of shows and photos of winners etc are publicised on our website www.orangeandfawnrex.com.

We are a progressive go ahead club and we welcome new members and fresh ideas.

Janice Calvert (Secretary, Nat Orange & Fawn Rex RRA)



Mini Orange Rex.
Photo courtesy Chris Wilding