

Secrets of sound stockmanship

All new rabbit fanciers should first become acquainted with the signs of health in an animal. Learn these by taking a long look at a rabbit – any rabbit.

First, examine the teeth. The rabbit belongs to the family of animal which gnaws; and the teeth give a clear indication of this gnawing and grinding habit.

There are two grooved upper front incisors (the grooves make them look like four) and behind them two smaller incisors.

In the lower jaw is a single pair of front incisors. These are the cutting teeth. Their edges are chiselled.

In the healthy rabbit the lower front teeth fit neatly on to the small upper incisors.

Twelve other teeth in the upper jaw are grinders, with ten grinders in the lower jaw. They take a lot of wear and tear but keep on growing throughout life.

The grinders, like the incisors, should fit so that they can do their work properly. All the teeth should be clean, particularly at the gums.

The ears of the rabbit are prominent, even in the smaller varieties. They, too, should be clean. When they touch there is sometimes a scarcity of hair. So long as the skin is clean it is not to be mistaken for a sign of ill health.

The rabbit's ears are very active. They spring into listening position at the slightest noise and can work independently. They should be firm and strong with no tendency for either ear to droop. (The Lop group of rabbits is, of course, the exception).

This activity is necessary to make up for some defects in the rabbit's vision. Though he can clearly see things well in front of him, he can see little to the rear and is handicapped with objects a few inches in front of his nose.

The eye tells a good deal about health. It should be clean, sparkling and bright. A slight dry secretion on the eyelid is inconsequential, but a wet or running eye is a symptom of one or more kinds of trouble. The eyelashes should not be ingrowing.

The rhythmical twitching of the rabbit's nose tells its own story of sensitivity. It also suggests that the owner should be wary of dust in the rabbitry, or in the hay, or of any condition which will irritate the membrane of the nostril.

Rabbits can sneeze but they should do so only very occasionally. A discharge from the nose is a sign of trouble – see articles on pages 36 & 37.

The nails of the rabbit grow continuously and may sometimes overgrow and so require attention. They should be clipped back gently, but never too close to the quick.

Watch now how the rabbit moves. Give it space and it will show all its characteristic paces. Down go the two back legs together; up go the two front ones moving independently.

There is a straightness and strength about the legs up, down, front and back alternatively, with the bulk of the rabbit's weight clearly on the long part of the rear legs behind the hock joint. There should be no sign of soreness on the hock.

These strong back legs are also used to sound the alert. Bucks and does give a heavy stamp when they are alarmed or excited, and sometimes apparently for no reason at all except their own satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

These traits of movement in a rabbit should tell the owner something about how to house his animals. They need a floor which is solidly fixed.

Now look at the rabbit in repose. It lies with its limbs relaxed, frequently with its hind feet tucked neatly beneath it, but quite often with them stretched out behind it.

The ears fall softly on to the back. It breathes steadily through the nostrils and generally with no noise. Occasionally a rabbit will develop a natural grunt.

On very hot days as the rabbit lies on its side with the hind legs outstretched it will raise its ear and forequarters and pant. Fresh air and cooler conditions are indicated.

Even when the rabbit is relaxed there is always about it a slight impression of alertness.

The doe in kindle does not exhibit this quite so much. Often she will lie on her side more concerned with her own affairs than with the outside world.

But even she, in health, should not be inert.

This character of alertness is a feature of every rabbit which is fit. It is most noticeable, however, in the smaller varieties.

Break the drowsy summer afternoon silence of the rabbitry with the smallest noise and at once heads are raised, ears flick up, the body (though it appears hardly to move) is clearly 'at the ready'.

So far we have examined the rabbit mainly with our eyes. Now pick it up and feel it.

Run the finger and thumb down the length of the back. Feel the resilience of the muscles – 'like a bicycle tyre'. The hindquarters and the shoulders should be well fleshed. There should be meat, too, above the hocks. The stomach should be firm but not distended. Our healthy rabbit has the feel of an athlete; to judge by his agility and antics he very often is.

The coat of the rabbit is always important. It goes through many natural processes of growth and moult.

Rabbits, unlike hares, are not born fully furred. (Unlike hares, too, they are blind for the first ten days or so of their lives). The soft nest coat which characterises the young rabbit at weaning age gradually gives place to an intermediate coat not so resistant as the full adult coat, but, nevertheless firm.

This intermediate coat is at its best for a brief fortnight or so.

At six to eight months (dependently partly on the size of the breed as well as on nutrition, environment, the time of the year) the rabbit attains the full glory of its

adult coat. The fur now should be firm and glossy, with the appearance almost of being able to reflect light.

The moult which thenceforward in the life of the rabbit takes place is the natural process of shedding old hair and growing new.

It begins gently in the spring often almost imperceptibly. There may be a few loose hairs on the flanks, in coloured rabbits it is perceptible as a deadening of the fur.

Usually as the weather gets warmer the coat becomes thinner.

By autumn the moult should be most clearly in evidence. The coat should now be rapidly shed. First on the head, then round the nape of the neck, down the back and the chest, along the flanks, and so to the rump. Last trace of it should be found in the arc of fur just about the tail.

Not all rabbits moult alike. With some it is a rapid process with fur coming out in handfuls. The beginner need have no worries about this. A clean moult is to be desired.

In this consideration of the healthy rabbit we may refer briefly to one of the rabbit's peculiar habits, but one which is perfectly normal. It is known as coprophagy.

In addition to the normal faeces the rabbit produces another kind of pellet rich in predigested protein which, with catlike agility, it takes direct from the anus. The rabbit, let it be repeated, is normal and healthy.

There are few creatures in fact more clean than the domestic rabbit when properly housed and fed. The rabbit's own sanitary arrangements in a hutch are a model to many other animals.

The doe's nest at kindling time lacks nothing in maternity comfort, and anyone who has paused to watch a rabbit sit up and wash his face with the most careful attention to the ears will have noted how perfect are his ablutions.

Cleanliness in the rabbit is an essential part of good condition.

Fur & Feather factsheet.

