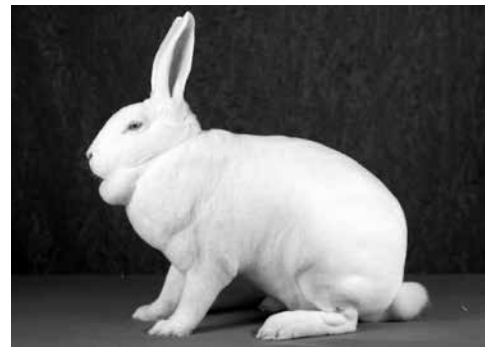


Bradford's best:

Congratulations to P & C Gray's standard Ermine, best of breed, best Rex and third best in show at the 2018 Bradford Premier Small Animal Show

This tribute to the Ermine was written by John Hodgkiss



“Ermine Rex: As pure a white as possible, creamy or yellow tinge a fault”.

The first point to note is that there is no mention in the standard of the eye colour; in theory this could be brown, blue or pink as long as both eyes are the same.

Whilst there is, to my knowledge, at least one well-known breeder attempting to perfect the blue-eyed version, for all practical purposes Ermines have pink or red eyes; they are, in fact, albinos and can carry any other colour genes hidden which can cause some surprises if used as an outcross!

As albinos, it might be expected that all Ermines would be pure white as the standard demands, since their genes prevent the formation of any pigments. However, if you look at a large class of Ermines on the judging table, you will see as many variations in colour as in any other variety.

Some of this can be put down to the preparation of the animals – or lack of it – but there is one factor which can cause yellowing in the apparent colour of an Ermine as it ages, and that is the colour of its fat.

All rabbits, of course, lay down fat as they mature, and this is generally white in colour; sometimes, however, the fat contains residues of pigment from the food it has consumed which gives it a yellowish tinge, which will show through the skin of a white rabbit and give a pronounced yellow cast to the appearance of the coat above the layer of fat.

It is almost certain that this tendency is inherited as a simple recessive gene, so the most practical advice is not to breed from any animal which turns yellowish with age, or from its parents.

That factor apart, however, the biggest influence on the colour of an Ermine is dirt. Such things as urine or beetroot stains are obvious, but the biggest enemy is dust, and people have been known to go to fantastic lengths to keep this away from the Ermines which they wanted to show. Hutches gloss-painted on the insides and washed weekly. Shredded white paper as bedding. Hay washed before feeding, and fed through external hoppers. Food sieved and vacuumed to remove the dust.

In days gone by, all exhibitors of Ermines would insist on being penned on the top tier, and many would wash their pens before letting their rabbits anywhere near them.

One very prominent fancier would not even breed from any doe which did not confine its toilet activities to one corner of the hutch, which can then readily be cleaned out every day. He reckoned that they would bring up their youngsters to do the same – and he could well have been right.

Whilst some of the above measures may be a little extreme they give the lie to the

overworked assertion that winning with white rabbits is easy. Breeding them may present fewer problems, but to put one down in good show condition is a work of art.

Having said all that, it remains a fact that over the years the Ermine has been numerically the strongest of the rexes, and the most successful. The treatment of breeding and resting stock need be no different than for other colours, but those which have show potential require something different.

Whilst it is not possible to select for colour at the baby coat stage, those specimens which look the most promising for type, coat length and density should be sorted out as soon as possible and put into separate hutches.

Shredded paper may be difficult to obtain, but dust-free white wood shavings can be bought, and a very thick layer of these will be needed on the floor.

Hopefully, the rabbit will only dirty one corner of the hutch, in which case a daily clean out will be possible; otherwise, the entire hutch must be cleaned one or two times a week.

The whole object of the exercise is to KEEP the animal clean; if it is allowed to become dirty, to GET it clean is a very difficult task, and you may well ruin it in the process.

Hay can be shaken and blown to be reasonably dust-free, and tied in a bundle to the outside of the hutch, rather than put on the floor to get wet and dirty.

Greenfoods must only be given in such small quantities as will be cleared up straight away, whilst roots like carrots and beetroot are best avoided altogether.

Bottle drinkers are obviously an advantage compared with open dishes, but do keep an eye on the valves as a leak can quickly undo all your good work.

However clean the animal's living quarters, it is unrealistic to expect to be able to take an Ermine straight from its hutch to the show pen, as with some other breeds. There must be some dust in the atmosphere which will adhere to the oils in the rabbit's coat, and inevitably some staining of the feet must occur however often the hutch is cleaned.

The stains must be dealt with as soon as they are seen; methylated spirits or witch hazel will usually deal with them, or there are proprietary substances on the market which claim to be even more effective.

The feet should be dried off, and rubbed over with one of the chalk blocks so beloved by dog fanciers. It is not a bad idea to keep the feet well chalked anyway, as staining materials will generally adhere to the chalk in preference to the rabbit's fur.

Just prior to the show the entire coat should be dusted with talc, French chalk or a commercial cleaning powder sold for the purpose. This will remove the dust from the fur without damaging its natural oils.

Please remember, though, that every trace of cleaning agent must be removed before the animal is penned, otherwise the judge is quite entitled to disqualify it.

For as long as Ermines have been shown, rumours have abounded that certain very successful exhibitors had their own 'secret formula' to turn a creamy rabbit into a pure white one, and at the same time improve its coat.

Let us be quite clear that if the rabbit is genetically faulty, there is nothing we can do to improve matters. On the other hand, there are several chemicals which will remove every trace of dust from the coat and make it look whiter than it was, but at the same time they remove the coat's natural oils, and spoil its appearance and texture.

The oils will be replaced naturally in due course but, in theory at least, they could be replaced by artificial means, with something which does indeed make the coat feel denser.

Such a practice, even if effective, is strictly illegal and would be most severely dealt with by any judge who detected it.

To anyone who has ever actually tried improving nature in this way, let me just say this: you may well get some short-term gain, even get some misguided satisfaction that you have made such-and-such a judge look a fool.

In the long term, such activities will get you absolutely nowhere. Your stock will do no good if sold to anyone else, unless you pass on the 'secret formula', and once you do that your sins will surely be visited upon you.

It may be permissible to 'trim away' faults in pigeons, poultry or even dogs, but the rabbit must be shown as nature intended it.

Having said that, there is no evidence that illegal preparation is at all common among Ermines, but what is indisputable is that, on average, they do have much better coats than the other colours, and the same is true for the albino versions of many other breeds of rabbit.

Is this just a coincidence, or do albinos have some inbuilt advantage when it comes to selective breeding for improvement?

There have been many theories advanced over the years, perhaps the most common being that, as colour is not a problem, the breeder is able to concentrate purely upon coat and type.

There must be at least a grain of truth in this: although, as we have seen, there is a genetic factor controlling the APPARENT colour of the

animal it appears far less complex than the factors governing other colours, so selective breeding for colour is accomplished more quickly and effectively with an albino.

A second theory is a little more scientific, in that it has been suggested that because the fur is white, the animal would tend to radiate more heat than a dark coloured one, and therefore needs to grow a thicker coat to compensate.

An attractive theory on the surface; it is a well-known fact that white-painted vehicles and aircraft remain cooler internally in tropical conditions than do dark-painted ones. However, this is due to their reflecting the radiation from the sun, and we do not, if we know what's good for them, keep our rabbits in the sun.

Body heat is generally lost by convection, not radiation, and the theory is confounded by the fact that, after the Ermines, the best rex coats are carried by Blacks and Seals.

Another theory is entirely my own, and, as such, is liable to be shot down in flames the day after publication, but be that as it may!

It is known that the density of a rabbit's coat is dependent upon the number of hair follicles in the skin, a factor controlled by heredity, but not all the follicles are actually growing hair at any one time.

Whilst the rabbit may be genetically capable of producing, say, a thousand hairs per square inch, it may, in practice, produce only five hundred.

In the past this difference was held to be due to purely environmental concerns; certainly, a rabbit kept in very cold conditions will have a much denser coat than the one it will moult into if it is moved into a greenhouse. This applies whatever the colour of the animal, it will respond to environmental pressures provided that:

- (a) It has the genetic potential to do so.
- (b) It is able to synthesise the necessary proteins to manufacture the extra hair.

As will be seen from my chapter on genetics*, the metabolism of proteins is fundamental to the life-cycle. Not only is hair a protein, but so are the pigments which give the rabbit its colour.

It seems logical to me that, if two rabbits were genetically identical apart from the fact that one has genes which required it to produce pigment proteins, and the other did not (ie. was an albino) and they were kept in identical environments, then the coloured one would have that much less protein available for the production of hair, and would be less dense than the albino. Food for thought?

For whatever reason the Ermine was, and remains, the colour 'most likely to succeed'. It has had its ups and downs over the years, but the same might be said of many other colours.

Prevalent faults must include length and texture of coat – far too many have coats which are nearly three quarters of an inch long, with too many projecting guard hairs.

Type in many cases leaves much to be desired; the bold heads and eyes of yesteryear now seem to be at a premium, whilst narrow shoulders and an unsightly dewlap spoil many an otherwise good specimen.

One of the biggest problems I find is with the front feet, very often almost completely devoid of fur.

On the credit side, none of the faults are universal, so the gene pool is still there, and the specialist club is in very good hands.

More than any other colour, the Ermine presents a challenge to one's showmanship and stockmanship, and as such will always be at or near the top of the popularity list.

*Extract from
"A Fancier's Guide to the Rex Rabbit"
by John Hodgkiss, available from the
Fur & Feather Bookshop.

The complete guide to the rex rabbit
with many illustrations. Softback, 212 pages.
£16.50

