

Interpreting Body Language and Behavior of your Rabbit ¹

Rabbits have a language all their own. Here are some tips on interpreting your bunnies hops, kicks and grunts.

Sniffing

May be annoyed or just talking to you. Often rabbits will bump your hand or arm with their nose while sniffing around. This is as if to say “I see you there and you are ok.”

Licking

Showing affection. A rabbit that licks is very comfortable in its environment.

Grunts or Ears back and down

Usually angry. A warning. Watch out or you could get bit! A mature doe can be very verbal and may become territorial of her cage. This is a sign to back off. But don't let the noise fool you. Don't let the rabbit have the upper hand. Be persistent with handling and removing her from her cage. These verbal warnings that should get her nowhere. Put your hand up and over her head and body and firmly hold her down for a couple of seconds in place before scooping her out of her cage. This lets the rabbit know you are in charge and will not tolerate her charging (or worse yet, biting). A rabbit will almost always back into a corner or retreat if they know you mean business. A rabbit that continues to launch forward and then progresses to biting has a serious behavior problem. These animals will take a lot of patience and gentle handling to calm down. Sometimes changing the cage from one that opens at the top, to one that opens in the front helps the situation. A rabbit should be removed from their cage by scooping under the belly and semi-holding them with the other hand supporting the rear. A rabbit should never be “scruffed” which is grabbing the skin behind the neck to lift them. And worse, a rabbit should never be carried by the ears.

Shrill scream

Hurt, dying or extremely scared. Sometimes this sound can mean an injury and sometimes just fright. Sometimes a young kit will scream in fear when first handled out of the nest box. After feeling hands and the sensation of being carried around a few times, it becomes business as usual.

Circling your feet

Usually indicates sexual behavior. He/She's in love. Don't let this behavior become aggressive with a buck.

Spraying

Males that are not neutered will mark their territory in this way. Spraying happens more often when a rabbit is upset or excited or in a buck that smells a doe around. Also can indicate a sign of dominance or aggression. Spraying is usually rare for male rabbits that are housed by themselves. Sometimes neutering a male will reduce this behavior.

Chinning

Their chin contains scent glands, so they rub their chin on items to indicate that they belong to them. Same as a cat rubbing its forehead on people and objects.

False pregnancy

Females may build a nest & pull hair from their chest & stomach to line the nest. They may even stop eating as rabbits do the day before they give birth. If a female was with

¹In part taken from House Rabbit Society's webpage <http://www.rabbit.org/behavior/body-language.html>

another rabbit that mounted her (but did not in pregnant her) she may go through all the signs of pregnancy just the same.

Bunny hop/dance

A sign of pure joy & happiness!

Begging

Rabbits are worse than dogs about begging, especially for sweets. Beware of giving the rabbit treats as overweight rabbits are not as healthy as trim rabbits. Treats should not contain sugar which will upset the gut flora in a rabbit's digestive track. Treats can be plain Cheerios, pressed oats, shredded wheat squares without sugar, a raisin, a *tiny* piece of apple, dried bread, black oil sunflower seeds. Giving any sort of lettuce or greens is not recommended. Once a rabbit develops diarrhea it is very hard to clear up.

Territory droppings

Droppings that are not in a pile, but are scattered, are signs that this territory belongs to the rabbit. This will often occur upon entering a new environment. If another rabbit lives in the same house this may always be a nuisance.

Playing

Rabbits like to push or toss objects around. They may also race madly around and do flips at play.

Don't touch my stuff

Rabbits can become displeased when you rearrange their cage as you clean. They are creatures of habit and will push objects back into place that are moved. Rabbits will also pick a spot to potty in and use it consistently. They usually pick one corner of their cage. Do not rearrange the cage and place items in the "potty corner" or you will end up with an angry bunny who will move it back. A pan can often be placed in the potty corner with pine shavings in it and the rabbit will then become litter trained.

Stomping

Frightened, mad or trying to tell you there's danger. In the wild a rabbit stomps to send vibrations through the ground so that neighbors can sense danger also.

Teeth Grinding

Indicates contentment, like a cat's purr. Loud grinding can indicate pain and should be considered a serious sign of a problem.

Chewing Wire

Rabbits love to chew. Their teeth grow a half an inch a month. Chewing is the natural way they wear down the teeth. It is a good idea to provide a chew stick of pine or an apple branch to satisfy that urge to chew.

Chewing Fur

Rabbits sometimes chew their fur out of boredom. Provide toys to distract them from this activity. Toys can be things like a pine cone, a hard plastic cat ball with the jingle bells in the middle, a small hard ball etc.

Fur chewing may also be a sign of not enough roughage in the diet or not enough protein in the diet. Give hay and make sure the rabbit pellets have at least 16% protein level.

Fur chewing of the feet may indicate an itchy foot fungus. The feet will eventually go bare on the pads. To kill the fungus, swab on full strength iodine or Vanodine.

Thoroughly wash the bottom cage wire or cage bottom and disinfect.