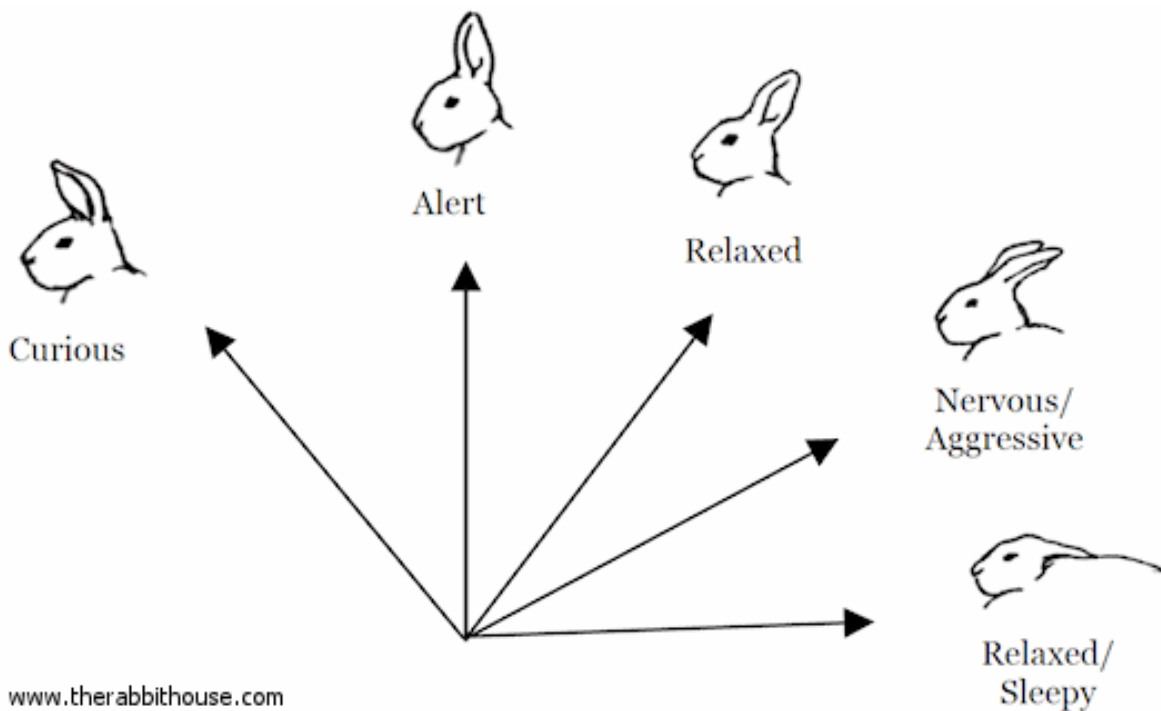


How to Understand Rabbit Body Language and Behavior

Rabbits are unique pets that have a communication style that many people might interpret as being very stoic or difficult to understand compared to other pets like dogs or cats. Often, patient observation is the best way to learn to read and interpret a rabbit's body language and behavior. To help get you started on learning to "speak rabbit" here are some helpful tips and behaviors to look for.

Ears: Like many other animals, such as horses or cats, a rabbit's ears are very expressive and can tell you if a rabbit is upset, alert, or relaxed.

Rabbit ears that are pinned flat back with a tense body may indicate the rabbit is upset, angry, or scared. Rabbit ears that are flat back with a relaxed body just mean the rabbit is resting. Rabbit ears that are straight up mean that the rabbit is curious or alert and rabbit ears that are not straight up, not tense and back usually indicate that the rabbit is relaxed or content.



Chinning: Rabbits have scent glands under their chin, similar to a cat's scent glands on their cheeks. Rabbits will often be seen "chinning" which is when they rub their chin on an item to mark it with their scent. Rabbits chin both as a territorial behavior and as a simple reminder to help them keep track of where they have been. Below are examples of rabbits chinning:



Flopping: Flopping is a behavior that stumps a lot of people who are new to rabbits. Far from being a negative behavior, flopping is actually a sign that the rabbit is totally relaxed and comfortable. When a rabbit "flops" they might appear to have a brief attack and will suddenly fall or flip over onto their side, exposing their belly. As long as the rabbit doesn't appear to be struggling, there is no reason to panic, this just means the rabbit is content and happy in the moment.



Classic examples of "Flopping"



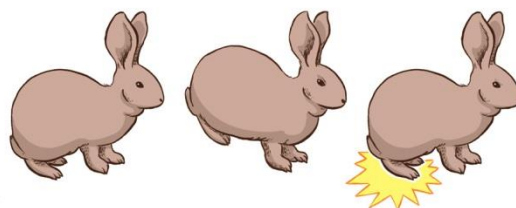
Nipping: Nipping has many possible meanings in a rabbit, and only careful observation and getting to know the rabbit's personality will help you interpret the true meaning. Nipping could be a request for attention, much like attention love bites in cats, or it could be a warning nip letting you know the rabbit is agitated. Lastly, a nip might simple be a bonding behavior, where the rabbit is trying to return the favor of pets, brushes, or attention, by grooming you.

Binkies: A binky is when a rabbit jumps, runs and leaps in the air. Sometimes they will kick or twist in the air as well. Binkies are signs of playfulness and joy in rabbits. Below are some examples of rabbit binkies.



Grunting: Grunting noises are angry reactions towards another rabbit or a person and should be heeded as a warning to back off; otherwise the rabbit might escalate by scratching or biting. Rabbits grunt when they feel threatened or territorial.

Thumping: Thumping is an attention getting behavior. Sometimes a rabbit will thump to warn others about something it has seen or heard, or to express fear or being upset.



Nose Nudging: Nose nudging is another behavior that has several meanings. Rabbits might nudge, push, or toss things around as a form of play, to solicit attention from you, or as a territorial behavior meaning “mine!” or “get out of the way!”

Rabbits can be very territorial and particular. They like their things arranged a certain way, and can become upset when their things are moved. If the rabbit is tossing or forcefully nudging while you are cleaning, it probably telling you it doesn't like what you are doing. If it nudges softly or tosses toys while socializing with it and its other body language suggests it is relaxed, it is probably being playful or soliciting attention for pets and grooming.

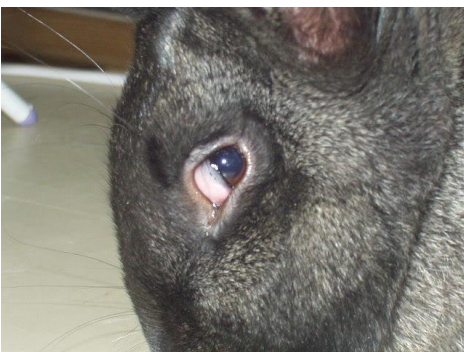
Watch the rabbit closely to put its behavior into context and determine what it means by its nudging.

Licking: Licking is a sign of affection in rabbits. It means “I love you, I trust you.”

Screaming: Screaming, is a very alarming and frightening sound and is a sign of extreme terror or excruciating pain in a rabbit. If you hear a rabbit make this sound, get a shelter supervisor immediately.

Tense body, upright tail, laid back ears / Lunging: Lunging or a tense body with laid back ears and upright tail is an angry or territorial behavior. The rabbit is telling you it doesn't like what you are doing and is prepared to fight. It might be saying “don't touch my stuff!” or “back off!” If you are cleaning their kennel and they do this, move the rabbit over to the other side to clean, or put the rabbit in a carrier.

Third Inner Eyelid Showing: If you can see the third inner eyelid in the corner of a rabbit's eye, it means the rabbit is very frightened or stressed out. You should give the rabbit space, fill out a behavior form and let a shelter supervisor know.



Rabbit Tail Wag: Rabbit tail wagging is a subtle behavior and might be hard to notice at first. This behavior is a sign of defiance. Essentially, the rabbit is talking back to you, letting you know it disapproves of whatever you are asking or doing.

Laying with head flat on the ground: The rabbit is being submissive and might be requesting to be pet or groomed.



Droppings: Rabbits droppings that are not in a pile and are scattered and made one by one as the rabbit explores are normal. The rabbit is marking territory and also leaving a trail so it knows where it has been, kind of like Hansel and Gretel leaving a trail of breadcrumbs.

Rabbit Periscope: Rabbit periscoping behavior is one of the easier rabbit behaviors to interpret. Quite simply, the rabbit is curious and looking around to see what is up.



Tooth Grinding: There are two kinds of tooth grinding in rabbits. The first is a soft, almost purring sound and is a sign that the rabbit is content and enjoying the attention it is getting.

The second is a loud, audible grinding or tooth clicking / snapping that is a sign of a potential medical emergency for the rabbit. If you can hear a rabbit grinding its teeth, best to err on the side of caution and fill out a vet check form and let a shelter supervisor know.

Mating Behavior

Finally, we come to mating behavior. There are many behaviors that un-spayed and un-neutered rabbit may display. Below are some.

Honking: Soft, almost inaudible sounds, usually followed by circling are a courting behavior.

Circling: Is both a courting behavior and an attention seeking behavior.

Spraying: Is a territorial behavior. Both males and females may spray, and often unaltered rabbits will spray when in a new environment or when in close proximity to another rabbit.

Mounting: Mounting is both a mating behavior and a dominant behavior. In an unaltered rabbit, this is a sign that it is time to fix the rabbit by spaying or neutering. In an altered rabbit, it means the rabbit is displaying dominance and might be territorial.

Note: for bonded rabbit pairs, mounting is a way of bonding and not necessarily a sign of dominance.

More Information and Sources:

<http://rabbitresource.org/care-and-health/behavior/how-to-speak-rabbit/>

<http://www.bunnyhugga.com/a-to-z/rabbit-behaviour/rabbit-body-language.html>

<http://www.toomanybunnies.com/understanding-bunny-languag.html>

<http://rabbit.org/interpreting-body-language-and-behavior/>
