

Looking & Listening **By Phill Harrison**

I have heard it said many times that to be a successful student of human nature the key is to cultivate the art of looking and listening. I suppose in simple terms the ability to observe and to understand what you have seen and heard. In my experience the same observation skills are also key if you want to develop a keen understanding of how your rabbits behave. Knowingly or otherwise most Fanciers have these skills and practice them to the full. Is it not this in-built fascination with the creatures and how they behave that forms the very bond that every Fancier has with his stock. I appreciate this approach is not new because as a young man I used to sit in the old wash house at Sam Arnold's home in Knarsborough with the maestro, stock watching so to speak. It's a good habit to get into though whether you want to enjoy the tranquil atmosphere the rabbits generate or you just want an odd peaceful half-hour away from the stresses of modern life. You will learn a lot about your stock by watching and observing them.

Since I gave up work one of the big pluses for me has been the time I have had to devote to my stock. As a consequence of being around them at various times of the day light-hours I have seen and observed more aspects of their habits and how they behave than I could ever have hoped had I continued to work. I would also like to think I have improved my own understanding of my stock by taking the time to carefully observe and note their habits. Frankly it has been enlightening and has gone some way to giving me a better understanding of my Tans and their behavior patterns.

So having set the scene I thought for the benefit of newcomers to our breed I might share some of my experiences. The focus being on my Tans' habits, what I have observed, and the problems I have encountered. As with all my articles I don't purport to be an expert just a dedicated amateur.

As you know Tans are one of the oldest of the established breeds and can I would suggest, be more frustrating but not necessarily more difficult to breed than some of the modern breeds. The frustration is compounded by the breeder's knowledge that a Tan has a relatively short show life when compared with most other breeds. So it is essential to plan your litters so you can have a steady flow of stock for the show season. Any hiccup in the breeding plan can cause disappointment. In a recent conversation I had with the Devonian Ivor Paull, the topic of conversation turned to breeding habits, and the fact that Ivor was finding it fascinating watching his new litter of Tans emerging from the nest. Clearly from his tone his first litter had been hard earned so he was finding the experience and success very rewarding. In other conversations I have had with experienced Tanners and newcomers to the Tan, who themselves keep other breeds, they to find that breeding Tan litters is a very different prospect from the more modern breeds? Whereas with other breeds you can rely on the mother to do her job and it is rare to have to intervene, it is not always the case with a Tan Doe and you certainly have to be very watchful.

For many Tanners now the breeding season never actually stops and they continually breed for shows right round the calendar. As a consequence of my own experiences I now follow this principle, because in the past when I have halted my Does, by having a planned break in breeding say July to September, I have found it very difficult to start them all off again and suffered the consequences. So in the summer period I now rest my Does by slowing them down rather than stopping them. Litters stay longer with the Does and I try to ensure their diet is such that they don't pile on weight. They are also exercised during this period, which helps prepare them for the forthcoming autumn matings

In my experience Does need to be prepared for mating and once again I have found it is important to ensure that their diet is maintained at the correct level so as to ensure they don't get too fat. Like many I suppose I used to be a "two handful person" when it came to putting food in the pots. It was only when I had a serious problem with poor lactation in my Does that I started to look into the makeup of the food and measure food quantities more accurately. Since I started to use a pellet with a high protein level I have had few problems with fat Does.

Actually getting Does mated can be a long a tedious process if they are not ready and they are introduced too early to the Buck. So knowing what to look for in does saves hours of time and frustration on the part of the breeder. I can vouch for this from my own experiences. Once again the trick is understanding what to look for and being watchful. The changing habits of the Does are the tell tale signs when they are getting ready for a visit to the Buck. Signs such as digging holes in the corners of the hutch, excessive scratching as if they are making a burrow and the carrying of straw or hay. When you move to handle them they are apt to swish their tale and behave in a flighty manner. Also if you have them on the grooming bench and stroke them they will lift if they are ready to be mated.

Once introduced to the Buck, provided he is up for it then generally the breeder does not need to intervene and mating will take place quickly. I like to see the Buck mate the Doe twice and then I introduce her again to him 2-4 hours later. Using this method I have found that few Does "Miss". Failures with mating can occur when the Doe is not quite ready. A common problem with winter matings and seasoned Does is Phantom pregnancies. All the signs point to the Doe being mated even to being able to feel the youngsters in her stomach. What is more confusing the Doe thinks she is mated and behaves as such. The tell tale signs that something is amiss starts around day 14/15 when she may pluck herself and make a nest. When this occurs it is a near certainty that she will not produce a litter. When I have tried to introduce the Buck before the end date of the pregnancy the Does have not responded which is further evidence that they still think they are carrying young.

I know some breeders help the Buck by holding the Doe and I am sure it works. I find that if the Doe is ready then mating will take place quickly. If however she plays hard to get then experience has taught me that it will be a waste of time continuing. So I take the Doe out and return her to her hutch. I have found that some Does will respond to some

Buck and not others. This can be frustrating if you want a particular mating. I also find that with reluctant maiden Does they can be stimulated by using a young Buck as a "Teaser". This is an ideal way of assessing the Does readiness and enabling the young Buck to practice his art. Occasionally you can also get an end result you hadn't planned for!

Talking to other Tanners, especially newcomers, some people have problems knowing if the Doe is carrying young and the mating has been successful. I find that my Does give off re-assuring signals. Firstly within 4-5 Days they will start to mess the hutch about and with some Does this will go on for about 3 weeks. Also the Doe will parade about carrying straw. The excitable ones also calm down completely. At 10 days I take the Does out and very gently feel for early signs of the young, which are at this time about the size of peas clustered together towards the lower part of the stomach. If I am convinced they are mated I leave them alone and trust to nature, as handling them excessively is not advisable.

Once mated I have found that it is very important to ensure that the Doe is nursed through her pregnancy, especially where her diet is concerned. I learnt this lesson the hard way. The Tan show season starts in March/April with the Spring Shows, so mating for these shows needs to commence October / November. So as usual in Oct 97 I planned my matings and sat back waiting for my first litters. To cut a long story short I lost 52 youngsters from 14 litters between Nov 97 and Jan 98. The pattern was similar in every case. The Does made a nest, and bedded the litter down. What was different was that whereas normally a Doe would only visit the nest once a day, whereas my Does kept returning to the youngsters at regular intervals clearly agitated. After 3 days the youngsters died through lack of milk but I hasten to add no lack of effort by the Does in trying to get them to suckle. Clearly my Does had no milk or the babies could not draw it off sufficiently to stimulate the lactation process. I was at a loss to understand why. After reading various books I reasoned that the diet had to be a factor in my problem. The mix I was using, pellets, oats and flaked maize, I had used for a number of years without serious problems. So what had changed? I don't know to this day but I will be forever grateful to Ted Ross for the sound advice and guidance he gave me. He explained that like horses rabbits are susceptible to hot foods and maize is a hot food that makes them sweat. Had this aspect disturbed the lactation process, which begins very early in the pregnancy cycle. With the consequence that the Does could not feed the youngsters effectively in the crucial first days of their birth. Once I removed the maize within a matter of days my problem was solved. I also found that by offering cauliflower leaves and stalks just before and just after mating the lactation process was stimulated and the youngsters thrived. I also found that it is common for Does to almost stop eating in the last 24/48 hours prior to kindling but they do tend to take in more water so it is essential to ensure regular supplies are to hand.

It is mainly with maiden does that I have problems. Failure to pluck fur or not having the savvy to make a nest with the fur they have plucked can arise. Then I have found it is best to make a nest for them but take care to note which corner of the hutch the Doe favours or the youngsters will be moved about like musical chairs once she catches on to what

you are doing. Wandering youngsters is also common with maidens especially if their milk supply is slow in coming. When this occurs the babies tend to go on walk about and sadly can be lost if they are not returned to the nest quickly. I try to strengthen the nest to prevent them escaping and I have considered using nest boxes but as yet I have not gone that far.

I don't suppose Tan Does are any different to all the other breeds when it comes to motherhood; you get some good mothers and some poor mothers. I have found prior to mating and prior to kindling they can become very excitable, especially the maidens, and are best left alone until you introduce them to the Buck. Once through this phase generally they settle down to make good but very protective mothers. Fiddling with the new born offspring can I have found be counter productive and tends to make the Does over protective. If they have made a nest and are staying well away from it this is an excellent sign and from my experience the youngsters are in good hands. I stay well clear and trust the mother. Despite what we might think or desire, generally a Tan mother knows best and will only feed once every 24 hours. Remember it's the quality of the milk not necessarily the amount that ensures rapid growth. So don't be alarmed if the Doe looks to you as if she is neglecting the babies. Many of the Does drive themselves to almost skin and bone for the benefit of their offspring. At this time I have found it best to let nature take its course unaided.

Let's turn our attention to the head of the Stud. How many people have from time to time found it difficult to get their Bucks to show an interest in a Doe? From my experience I would suspect this is a common problem. Tan Bucks can be lazy and this impacts on their desire to entertain Does. I have found that much of this is down to lack of exercise, a tendency to over feed and the time when you introduce a Doe. It can be so frustrating to be in a situation where you have Does ready to mate and the Bucks are reluctant to oblige. So if you have the space, others and I have found that a simple rabbit run can be used effectively to both exercise the Bucks and aid the mating of Does. Also exercising youngsters in a rabbit run is beneficial to their growth and fitness and the entertainment value is first class, not to mention your chance to observe the stylish future winner from amongst the bunch. Seeing the rabbits express themselves does, I have found, also show up their qualities and aid stock selection. As far as Bucks are concerned feeding and timing are also linked; few Bucks will want to perform just after they have been fed. I have found early morning and early evening good times for matings, which I suppose, equates to what goes on in the wild. Bucks need to be kept in prime condition and one lesson I have learnt is to keep the feed quantity in line with the pellet maker's recommendations and not let the quantity creep up. If Bucks are kept in "working order" then I find you can look forward to strong healthy litters.

Finally I would like to say that one of the most enthralling aspects of our hobby is that you are never too old to learn however experienced you think you are. I have lost count of the number of times I have been given tips and advice from fellow Tanners and other Fanciers and I might add been very grateful for the help. Similarly as I have tried to bring out in my article if you get close to your stock, and many Tanners are, then you will also

learn from them and in the longer term reap the benefits. If you don't believe me pull up a chair in you're shed and just enjoy a spot of "looking and listening"