

Decode Rabbit Communication

Know what pet rabbits are communicating to you and others.

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Photo Courtesy of Ruth Lizardi

Body language is the most obvious indicator of a rabbit's mood.

Because rabbits have evolved to spend most of their lives in the dark — underground during the day and above ground at night — little of their communication is visual. The visual displays they do give tend to be subtle and short. After all, it is not a good idea to indulge in extravagant displays that might attract a predator's attention!

Body Language

For us humans, the most obvious indicators of a rabbit's mood are its ears and tail, although the former is not as easy to decipher in lop-eared breeds. A rabbit with upright ears is attentive and alert; relaxed ears indicate a relaxed rabbit. But beware of ears that are held flat against the head. This is an unhappy bunny, and, if accompanied by a tail held out straight behind, this is a rabbit about to attack.

Noise Communication

Rabbits make a range of noises that say much about their intentions. They growl when angry but, when content, will rapidly and gently grind their teeth. (A rabbit that is grinding its teeth quite slowly and with more force, however, is trying to tell you it is in pain, often also accompanied by it sitting hunched and not being its normal sociable self. This indicates that a trip to the vet is needed.)

Scent Marking

Scent makes up a large part of rabbit communication. Rabbits leave messages when they rub their chins on you and your belongings, when they urinate and defecate, and when they (usually the boys) spray you or another rabbit with urine. This latter behavior may indicate a bit of lust or it may be a warning that territorial boundaries are being crossed.

Sadly we humans are not blessed with a keen sense of smell, and much of what our rabbits are trying to tell us, we just will never understand. But by being observant and arming ourselves with a basic knowledge of rabbit behavior, we can do our best to decipher the rabbit code.