

The Art of Palpation

by Charlcie Gill
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Rabbits breed, well...like rabbits, right? Usually... In most cases, the doe is placed in the buck's cage, the buck falls over backwards or onto his side after a quick mount and a new litter of bunnies can be expected in 31 days.

In almost 42 years of raising rabbits, I am still amazed at how many raisers (many "old-timers") totally rely on the above scenario and then are disappointed when no bunnies appear after a month of anticipation. It is my opinion that if one is serious about raising rabbits, one should learn the art of palpation - - feeling for the developing embryos within the abdominal cavity of the pregnant doe.

Many folks make the excuse that palpation is too difficult to learn. Many rely on the "Test Breeding" method. About two weeks following the initial service, the doe is returned to the buck's cage. In theory, if she is bred, the doe will whine, growl, flatten herself against the cage floor and otherwise register her distaste to the buck's advances. Often this is the case, but unfortunately there are does who will breed if pregnant and those who refuse the buck when they are in fact, open. I've seen both examples many times. So why is this a problem?

- Does that are assumed to be bred are often fed extra feed that final 10 days before the due date - a waste of feed if she is not.
- Does that accept the buck even if pregnant, can fool the keeper into not providing the nest box when needed.
- A worst case scenario is the doe can actually become pregnant with two litters. (Does not only have two uterine horns, but have two cervixes as well.) If a doe was pregnant in only one horn, then conceives in the second two weeks later, when she kindles the older litter, the younger litter may die, become mummified, and create a permanent sterile condition, or the doe may become ill and die.
- It is just a plain bummer to anticipate a litter when none is forthcoming, so let's make sure...

Learning to palpate just takes a little practice. Older does are easier to practice on than first-litter does as their muscles are a bit more relaxed. I like to take the doe out of her cage and place her on a carpeted table, but you can palpate by leaving her in the cage if you prefer. With one hand, grasp the doe over the shoulders and take the other hand with the thumb and fingers opposing each other (see illustration), push up into the abdomen just in front of the pelvis. Be firm. Don't be shy.



People who fail at palpation usually do so out of fear of hurting the doe or developing embryos. The chances of that happening are very slim. Each embryo is cushioned in its own amniotic sac, so what you are actually feeling is the fluid filled amnion-not the embryo itself. Enough pressure can be used to raise the doe's hindquarters nearly off the table. Move your hand back and forth along each side of the abdomen and slightly towards the middle. At two weeks gestation, the embryos feel like large, firm grapes or olives. At 12 days they feel about marble-size and at 10 days like firm, ripe blueberries. Once I encounter embryos, I stop, congratulate the doe, and return her to her cage. The entire procedure takes only seconds to perform.

Some folks may confuse the round fecal pellets for embryos. Confusion can be avoided by remembering that the fecal pellets are small, very hard, and are found closer to the backbone while embryos are found about midway into the abdominal cavity. If you squeeze these pellets, they will feel *almost* stone-like...not the "firm fruit" feeling the embryos possess.

Also, don't wait to palpate thinking the larger embryos will be easier to detect. After 14 days, the embryos become larger and softer and are harder to distinguish from the other contents of the abdomen. I also recommend that when you practice, you palpate does you know are not pregnant. The comparison will make things fall into place that much easier for you.

I routinely palpate my does at 10 or 11 days. I can sell a bred doe that is really bred. There is no "hopefully" or "probably." By determining pregnancy early, she will have plenty of time to adjust to new surroundings. If a doe is not bred, I can rebreed her that much sooner. I also palpate at 28 days (when the nest box goes in). At this stage, you can feel the actual heads and bodies of the kits. After kindling, palpation makes it possible to detect does with retained fetuses. These does are culled as they usually become permanently sterile.

Palpation is a skill all serious rabbit breeders should master. Don't be shy. Give it a try!
