

Fancy rats as a hobby

by HELEN DAGG

IN THE past few months I have received four or five letters from people who have started to keep Fancy rats as a hobby and have asked me quite a few questions on the various aspects of Fancy rat keeping. Although I have answered these questions personally, they have not been mentioned in great detail in FUR & FEATHER so I will now go over them for the benefit of many others who may have these problems.

It surprises many people that bucks can be kept together in the same cage without any animosity. I have found through past experience that it was a waste of cages and time cleaning them all out, keeping one buck to each cage separately. Because of the fact that rats are gregarious, I had to put a doe in with each one to keep them happy which resulted in more litters than I really wanted.

All my bucks are kept together in one large cage. I have about seven bucks altogether and they live together quite happily without the need for the constant company of does.

Whenever I need a buck for mating I take him out and put him in a breeding cage with the doe overnight. The following morning I put him back with the bucks for the day. In the evening he goes back with the doe for the night. I carry on like that until the doe is pregnant, then he goes back with the bucks and he isn't away long enough for the other bucks to forget him.

People have asked me how to introduce a young buck they want to keep to the existing buck colony. This I have found very simple. I just put the baby straight into the bucks' cage between the age of four to six weeks. Young bucks do not pose a threat to adults and they usually sniff him over and then accept him. I have never yet had a young buck attacked by an adult.

To introduce an adult buck is a little more difficult. I usually take all the bucks out and put them in a show together with the newcomer for a couple of hours. They usually settle down and there isn't much room for fighting anyway.

After a couple of hours they have got used to each other and I put them back in the cage with a big dish of food to keep them occupied. Sometimes it is impossible to introduce a strange buck to the colony. Then he will have to be kept separate, but this is very rare.

I usually have more trouble with the does. They can be very bitchy and squabble among themselves quite often which is almost unheard of in the bucks. Sometimes it can be impossible to introduce a doe back to the colony after she has had a litter. I usually keep persisting until eventually the doe accepts the fact that her babies are grown up and she is among the adults again.

Another question I am asked about is mating rats of close relationship together—mother to son, father to daughter, and brother to sister. This can be done without any ill effects. If both parties have good points, a litter from them can fix these good points into a strain. But it can also fix the bad points as well which can be hard to eradicate. When going for type and good markings you must be very careful.

If close relationship matings are kept up for a few generations, bad effects can crop up such as lack of size, vigour and fertility. Even deformities can occur such as stunted tails. When any of these faults occur it is time to introduce an outcross.

As regards rearing the litters, two or three does can be left to kindle together in one nest. They will suckle each others young indiscriminately and has the advantage that one doe will come out to feed and the other will stay in the nest. In winter if they are kept outdoors this means that the babies will not get cold when they are very young.

Of course the disadvantage is that you do not know which baby belongs to which mother. As I like to know the parentage of

each rat, I keep my does separate unless they are going to produce young of a different breed or colour. When the markings start to show I cull down to what I want and put two litters and their mothers together in a new cage, after I have taken note of the markings. I do not usually have any trouble.

In winter, if it is very cold I have a lamp bulb over the cage and put a thermometer in the cage. Then I lower or higher the bulb till I reach the required temperature of about 60-65°F. Do not leave the thermometer in or the does will chew it.

Fostering, I have found very simple, so simple, in fact that all I do is just put the babies I want to foster into the nest with the other litter and leave them. I don't even remove the mother. I have never even tried to rub the babies with some of the sawdust.

Naturally it isn't always that simple. Although does are very good mothers they can be very bad ones as well. Usually they are no trouble and will accept other babies quite readily. You start by removing the doe to another cage then put the babies to be fostered in the nest with her own young. Leave them for awhile and they will mingle together. You can rub the new babies in the sawdust of the cages 'to put the mothers smell' on them, but as I said I have found this quite unnecessary. The doe will usually accept the babies immediately.

Reasons for fostering are, a doe dying while suckling a litter, a doe having a large litter while another has only three or four. Although usually a doe can rear all she kindles, it can be a great strain on her though.

Another reason for fostering is what I call a 'scattered litter'. This is when a doe kindles and then for some reason, usually around 2-3 days she suddenly buries everyone in the hay and sawdust and totally ignores them. Babies left like this can usually survive about 12 hours so I usually check every nest morning and evening.

Babies, even at this age are surprisingly hardy and can survive being buried in cold sawdust for a long time. I have pulled some out so blue and stiff with cold I thought they were dead. This is called hypothermia. If you find any in this state the first thing to do is

warm them up, though slowly. Put them in a bowl with some hay and sawdust and hang a light bulb over them. It will help if they are in a warm room as well. When they start moving about it is time to foster them.

At the expense of being personal I have found there is nothing like your own body heat to warm up a small animal that has got cold. I put the animal—mouse, baby rat or whatever—down my jumper and leave it there. This works wonders and I have saved many animals this way. You must make sure, they can breathe. Don't suffocate them! An oven turned on at the lowest point will do the trick though with baby animals this can be too hot and they may catch a chill.

The slow warming of hypothermia victims applies to adult rats as well and of course all other animals.

Regarding sizes and types of cages, any cage will do as long as it is escape proof and large enough. Check the mesh if you are putting baby rats in as they may be able to squeeze through—half inch by half inch is large enough.

The cage itself can be made of anything which is strong enough. Obviously a cardboard box would not do. Things like metal or wood or glass or plastic fish tank. Wood is particularly good because it is warm in winter. Surprisingly enough the rats don't chew through it, though they could quite easily with their strong teeth. They round off any corners that are sticking out but they don't make a serious attempt to chew a hole through. At least mine have never done so and I have kept mine in wooden cages for two years.

As for sizes, that depends on how many you intend to keep. For one or two rats, a cage about 2ft 6in x 1ft 6in is just about large enough though they will benefit from being let out for a run round. My breeding cages are about this size.

My community cages are about 3ft 6in to 4ft x 1ft 6in. I have made these out of old chests of drawers with the drawers taken out and floors put in with one level for each draw space. Then a wire mesh and wood front door on the front of each level. These are fastened with hook and eye fastenings.

NOVICE CORNER

DO NOT begin with too many varieties nor too many mice. Stick to one variety and aim for perfection before taking on a second variety.

Good size and bone are essential in the buck and good size, short coat and racy body in the does, with good ears, plenty of width between them, and good tapering tail with good set on. That means that the tail should continue from the rear of the mouse in one symmetrical length, tapering off to the end and not look as if the tail had just been glued on.

Ask the breeder from whom you buy your mice to explain how he breeds, and follow his instructions. You will not go far wrong if you go to a reputable breeder.

In Sells, Tans and AOVs avoid mice with pied tails—that is, mice with white tips at the tail end. But in the Marked varieties, Dutch, Broken, etc, it does not matter.

Avoid mice with chipped ears. When breeding, do not bring up too many in the nest. Four is enough if you want to retain size. Discard all small undersized mice from the litters.

In the Marked varieties look for the markings. They will show at a few days old. In Sells, pick out the best grown ones for keeping.

In the AOVs, that includes Silver Fox, Agouti, Cinnamon, Silver Grey, Sables, etc, you will have to allow a little latitude as they do not show their tickings, shadings, etc, for two or three weeks and sometimes even longer. But again discard those which are weakly, very short tails and very narrow between the ears.

