

(Ed's Note: The following article was written by Sid Taylor, a former secretary of the Abyssinian Cavy Club and an outstanding breeder of Abyssinians and marked varieties, in 1950. Although clearly some things have changed in the meantime, such as the existence of cereal rationing and probably the social acceptability of sending surplus stock for research, many of the fundamentals of breeding, selecting and caring for Abyss have not; and we hope that readers will find it of interest. The article was originally unearthed in 1980 on a visit to view the archives of Fur & Feather by Mr J.R. Bebbington, who was at that time a very famous judge and most successful exhibitor of both Sells and Abyssinians.

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# YOU CAN'T IMPROVE ON NATURE WITH ABYSSINIAN CAVIES

by Sid Taylor

I HAVE derived many years of pleasure from the Abyssinian cavy. I will endeavour to explain in detail the points and management, although details of housing and feeding will apply to most other varieties. I believe that no other animal in the world has the coat to equal the Abyssinian. Its chief characteristics are rosettes and ridges. I will deal with the points and description of show and breeding stock later.

I started cavy keeping (and many other fanciers did too) with a few boxes in the corner of the garden shed. As most fanciers will agree, the hobby does not stop there. For those with perseverance, this hobby has a knack of getting hold of one. Soon the beginner branches out and a special shed is made and hutches designed to his own specifications. The number of his stock jumps from a dozen or so to 100 or more. This number will take up no more space than what would be required to house 20 rabbits.

There are four main points to watch in establishing a healthy stud of Abyssinians, viz housing, cleanliness, feeding and foundation breeding stock.

It is not necessary to keep Abyssinians out of doors in order to maintain a harsh coat, free from softness, dullness and loose hairs. But I strongly believe that stock should be kept in a cool even temperature. My caviary has four windows in the roof, which can be propped open when the weather permits. The underside is covered with wire to prevent intrusion from cats or rats. At each end is a wire netting door, which is only covered up in extreme winter. Hutches can be of any size according to the number of cavies to a pen. I find it best to put sows in pig and young boars and exhibition stock in single hutches. I believe in as much height as possible per hutch.

The next important point is cleanliness. There is nothing worse for Abyssinians than a poky

hutch that has not been cleaned out for weeks. Apart from the appearance of the animal, cavy droppings and urine soon become a threat and give off strong ammonia fumes. If the hutches are infrequently cleaned, the fumes affect the growing and condition of the stock. The coat becomes soft and open, particularly the rosette centres. Dampness and humidity will cause a wheezing and rattling in the throat and chest and will eventually reduce the cavy to a handful of skin and bones, which will have to be destroyed.

Abyssinians have advanced in popularity and numbers in recent years, and often the cobby, well conditioned animal is the deciding factor on the exhibition table. Such a cavy generally carries a reasonably harsh coat. Feeding is also an important factor. Most fanciers have their own particular system. For eight months of the year this is fairly easy, for there is more or less abundant green food for the gathering. I favour short Dutch clover, grass and plantains. I avoid as far as possible the laxative varieties such as dandelions, sowthistle, lettuce, celery tops, and common white cabbage, as all cavies are susceptible to 'scours', which in most cases will kill young stock in a matter of a few hours. In winter months the cavy keeper can usually arrange to collect cauliflower leaves, celery tops, savoy cabbage, caulif trimmings from his greengrocer. Beetroot, swedes, mangolds, and in some areas sugar beet, can also be obtained. It's a good point to lay in a stock of roots when they are at their cheapest. I do not suggest that cavies will thrive on green food alone during the summer months. But there is no doubt that youngsters make better progress in summer because of the vitamins contained in the green foods.

But what about adults? Even a good horse cannot work hard on grass alone: that's got to feed him. Cavy keepers are allowed a cereal ration by the County Agricultural Officer, upon application, provided they send surplus and unwanted youngsters to research stations. Good hay is another essential to the diet. Meadow hay, if possible to obtain, is favoured by many fanciers. Mouldy hay will prove expensive in the long run, so the wise breeder will avoid this.

Feeding time usually depends upon man's working hours: hence the various systems. To save time in the early morning I give greens all round. In the late afternoon, I give crushed oats or mash, bran, crushed oats and soaked stale bread; in winter, flaked maize or barley meal can be added if available. In the evening I give hay and a few more greens. The main point is regularity and sufficiency: keep the cavies contented and losses will be slight. A balanced system of feeding is a necessity. The novice should keep as many Abyssinians as he can comfortably manage on the lines described. As a stud is slowly built up, few fanciers will find themselves out of pocket. The disposal of unwanted cavies to a collector for the research laboratories is only one source of income. A good day at a show now and again or the sale of good quality breeding stock or a good boar through advertisements in *FUR & FEATHER* will provide an additional income.

Body work is of great importance in the Abyssinian: When a good one is born, the main thing is to keep it a good one, by feeding and caring for it for the show pen. How often is the remark heard: 'How is your winner going on?'

'Afraid it's gone off' is the reply. The structure of the bone and flesh goes a long way to keeping the rosettes and ridges deep and erect. I have yet to see a faked Abyssinian. Its faults are based on birth to death.

Bad breeding stock will never produce winners. There are certain faults that crop up in litters from time to time. The worst of these is the flat back. That is to say that where the back ridge should be there is just plain flatness. Another type that should never be tolerated is one with two or more rosettes missing. A specimen which is one rosette short can be used for

breeding provided it is good all round. Flat shoulders are another fault.

Boars should be selected with an eye on their pedigree. Although every sow will have its faults, such as a double rosette, a guttery centre on any of its eight rosettes or one missing or out of line, I believe that the guiding line of selection is the back ridge which must be erect and as straight as possible. Length of coat should be as near maximum length (1 1/4 inches) as possible. I know I am correct in stating that many of the present-day fanciers have built their stud up on those lines.

It is unwise to mate two Abyssinians together which have the same faults. As every litter is examined the owner will soon see which boar suits certain sows. By selective breeding less faults will be produced.

What does a perfect Abyssinian look like? Much depends on the general make up. It should be cobby with good length of coat. Ridges should be erect. Depth of rosettes, pin-point centres of rosettes, straightness of their lay-out, height of shoulder point and fully furnished head particularly between the ears, mottled chop type of side whiskers are also characteristics. Small rosettes on the neck side of the shoulder are additional furnishings, particularly if balanced on either side.

The main rosettes, the saddle rosettes, comprise four across the centre of the back from left to right in a straight line, evenly spaced and radiating from a pin centre. These should be of good depth. The next two are the hip rosettes, one on the left and the other on the right hip. These should be bold and prominently shaped to match the back rosettes. The last two, the rump rosettes, are sometimes difficult to fix correctly, and can spoil a good animal. I do not like them too low over the rump, but fairly well up in line with the hips.

With these rosettes correctly spaced and placed, the cavy breeder can look to the ridges, which should be of good length. The back ridge runs from left to right and commences at an even distance between the bottom side of the first back rosette and left hip rosette and carries over in correct line to the right side. This is another important ridge, but is not so difficult to produce as is the centre ridge, which commences from the top point of the collar and runs in a straight erect line through the middle of the top two back rosettes, along the back bone so to speak, to a finish at the very end of the rump, thus dividing and evenly spacing the rump rosettes. Two smaller ridges are formed on the outer edges of the two top back rosettes which evenly space the two side rosettes from the collar to back ridge, furnishing off between hip and rump rosettes of each side of the body. The most popular colour is the tortoiseshell and white Abyssinian, followed by the equally attractive and perhaps harsher-coated brindle and tortoiseshell. These two are not so numerous today and there is always an opening for a good youngster. Next in line is the Self Red which is improving in quality. Often a good red and white puts in an appearance, and these can be shown in the Any Other Colour classes. These are usually T&W's with no black.

Roans show a great improvement in both grey and strawberry. The origin of these colours is a mystery, but nonetheless they are very attractive. Many good Blacks have been produced this year. Whites are somewhat rare, but Roans often produce albinos. I have bred several but all have suffered from weak eyes and have died.

As each litter is born and experience is gained, compare the youngsters with the parents and retain those that show a definite improvement. Discard all inferior specimens. If the adult boar is a good one and quality of offspring is satisfactory, do not be in a hurry to discard him, but cull relentlessly all the young boars. When building up a stud 'make haste slowly' by selecting youngsters that have a good length and wealth of coat and head furnishing.