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Rabbit whisperer can put bunny in a trance, even if it's hopping mad

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The motionless rabbit lying flat on its back with its legs pointed stiffly in the air does not appear to be in the best of health. It is not dead, though. It is merely sleeping.

Cliff Penrose, a mustachioed Cornishman from St Austell, has developed a curious ritual that appears to make rabbits relax and fall into a trance. He is the first rabbit whisperer — or at least the first person to lay claim to the title.

His feats first reached a wide audience on BBC Radio Cornwall on April 1, although the station was at pains to point out that the story was not a joke. Listeners could hear Mr. Penrose describing his techniques before — in a radio first — silently putting a rabbit into a trance live on air. “The first thing I do is lift her on to my chest,” he said, holding on to Tammy, a pet rabbit of his own. “You have to make sure you’re relaxed. What you have to do next . . . I’m going to have to bow to the rabbit.”

Mr. Penrose’s rabbit-pacifying skills are in much demand in Cornwall, where he has helped to relax them before they are treated by a vet.

Fiona Rawlings, of the Rock View Veterinary Surgery in St Austell, said that Mr. Penrose’s work had been invaluable. “Cliff uses a relaxation technique that induces the release of endorphins, making the rabbit feel relaxed,” she said. “It allows a close examination of the rabbit without discomfort, but it is not totally asleep, just completely chilled out. It is a great tool for coping with rabbits that have behavioral problems because it makes them feel less stressed.”

Ms Rawlings dismissed suggestions that the animals were playing dead, as they might if attacked by a predator. “In this state they are exposing their tummies — a very vulnerable part of their body, where their organs are,” she said. “If they were in fear they would be hunched up tightly.”

Other vets warned that putting rabbits into a trance was a stressful experience for the animals. Anne McBride, an animal behaviorist at the University of Southampton, said that the description of the rabbit's state was consistent with "tonic immobility", a condition in which the rabbit's muscles are relaxed but the animal itself is highly stressed. She said that studies of rabbits' stress hormones, heart rates and breathing rates during and after tonic immobility show that they are in a highly alert state. "What we tell vets is that it is very useful for a quick examination, but it is stressful. Rabbits do not get used to it."

Mr. Penrose, 60, who appeared in the national press in 2000 as the owner of Sonny, an enormous 21lb rabbit, began developing his technique while recuperating from a triple-bypass heart operation, having had to retire from his job with a China clay business. He spent more time with his rabbits and observed that they could read his mood.

“I discovered that if I was in a bad mood the rabbits would react to that and become fidgety and unruly, but if I was having a good day they would be calm and no trouble,” he said.

His ritual begins with close contact with the rabbit. “You have to start by stroking the rabbit, which calms them down, and make sure you keep constant contact. I can sense when the rabbit is calm or not by feeling the vibrations running through its body.

“You must put your right hand under their body and left hand on the rear and then bring the rabbit up to your chest. When you lay them down, the rabbit will then be completely relaxed, but you must make sure you bow to the rabbit.”

The bow is the final move, supposedly to prevent the rabbit from feeling threatened before it shuts its eyelids. The creature will then remain in a trance for up to ten minutes, which gives him time to check the state of its belly and paws.

Mr. Penrose, who has bred rabbits for 30 years, said that it was important to be confident when holding them. “If you are scared or nervous or stressed then the rabbit will sense that — they are extremely intelligent animals.”

He said that he was often called upon to treat rabbits that showed aggression, a problem that he attributes to their being handled incorrectly by their owners. “People often get these pets without really understanding what they are.”