

Winter Litters by Katrin Becker

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It's getting to be that time of year in the Northern Hemisphere when the nights get colder and sometimes the days don't get much warmer than the nights. I've been raising Rex for nearly 20 years and I usually don't breed in the winter but I've had occasional litters in the past when the temperatures were well below freezing - usually they do fine. I've had a few does loose singleton babies when it was 40 below but I rarely loose babies to the cold.



This past year I tried breeding year round for the first time. My rabbits live in an unheated garage during the winter and I don't use extra heat. I live far enough in the country that if a fire were to start anywhere I'd have almost no hope of saving anything. As a result I really hate using heat lamps and try to avoid them whenever possible. The only time I ever I hung a heat lamp above a nest box I ended up losing the whole litter. It was in the minus teens and when I checked on a just born litter the nest fur was crusty on the outside - the moisture from the babies breathing must have condensed and then frozen. I felt sorry for them (even though they were toasty warm when I put my hand in the nest) so I hung a heat lamp about 12 inches above the nest. When I came back 2 hours later they were all dead. The lesson I learned: I should have trusted their mom and left them alone.

I know many people fret when the temperatures drop below freezing, but if

you take some precautions, you don't have to suffer losses to the cold.

Use nest boxes made out of material that insulates and make sure your does have plenty of nesting material.



I use either wooden nest boxes with lids or plastic storage bins (about 18" x 12" x 8" high) with a 6" hole cut in one side and the lid on.



I set that on top of a piece of plywood so there are several layers of something between the babies and the cage wire. Remember that babies wiggling around will often end up on the bare floor of the nestbox so it's important that that not be metal.



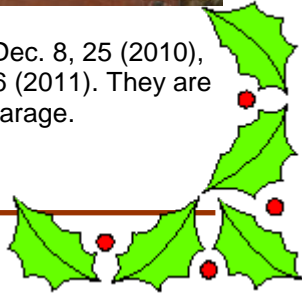
My nest boxes are big enough that the does can sit inside next to the babies without sitting on them. Many of my does sit near the babies when it's really cold. I make sure the does have plenty of straw for bedding.



The cold will usually not be a problem if the doe has been able to make a good nest. I give them as much hay or straw as they can stuff into the nest box, and rabbit fur is a VERY good insulator.



I had litters born Dec. 8, 25 (2010), Jan 12, and Mar 6 (2011). They are in an UNheated garage.



Winter Litters, continued

Like I said above, I have two different kinds of nest boxes and both are covered. One is a wooden box that is open on one end but has a 4" high board across the lower part.



The other is a plastic storage bin with the lid on and a 6" hole cut at the end of one side.



I usually put some plywood underneath the nest box and when I take the box out to check babies that board is often warm underneath where the babies are. I also try and make sure none of the hay in the nest gets flattened down and that the doe's fur is carefully arranged over the babies after I've checked them. I check them daily for the first 4-5 days, then every other day after that. I often take them out to photograph them but if it's really cold I just count them without picking them up.

When the first December litters were born, the temps were around freezing during the day and -14 or so at night. There were days when it was much

colder. We even had a few nights where it dipped below -20.

I also think it helps if the litters are big enough (6-8) to keep each other warm, and it also helps if the weather cooperates so that it isn't bitterly cold (i.e. below zero) until the babies have some fur, but that only takes a few days.



I was worried about one of the litters born January 8 because one doe was a first-time mom who only had 4 kits and it was VERY cold. One baby was quite chilled when I found them, so I heated it under my coat for a while and put it back. When I checked an hour later, it was cold again so I took the nestbox in the house and put a fan heater on it for about an hour. Then I wrapped the whole box in an old sheet (except for a space for the doe to get in and out) and took it back outside. The baby who got chilled was also smaller than the rest so I kind of expected to lose it..



The week they were born was bitterly cold: lows around -10F and highs around 0F. The weather was all over the map this past winter - going as high as 60F and as low as -20F. At four weeks those four kits were the hoppiest and most playful babies I've had in a very long time. The one that got chilled is the silliest of the bunch.



Of the 10 litters I had this past winter, with one exception, the only babies I lost were to first time moms, and none of them lost more than I would expect to lose at any other time of the year. I did lose one baby that ended up outside the nestbox. If it had been summer, it still would have died.

I try to keep my stock strong and healthy, and as natural as possible. Good mothering ability is something we can select for. I think does that can't or won't look after their babies properly should probably be replaced. For me that includes being able to raise litters in the winter without heat.

-Katrin



