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Sexual behavior of farm animals: A review

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Abstract

Sexual behaviour among farm animals comprises courtship and mating. It is largely controlled by hormones. This review comprehensively explores sexual behaviour in farm animals, characterized by complex conscious and unconscious actions aimed at reproductive success, including desire, arousal, mating and parenting. Sexual behaviour varies across species and is influenced by intrinsic factors such as hormones, genetics, age and experience, as well as extrinsic environmental and social conditions like photoperiod, temperature, nutrition and socio-sexual interactions. The review differentiates sexual behaviour into appetitive (courtship, mate preference) and consummatory (copulation) phases, both regulated mainly by steroid hormones, including testosterone, oestradiol and progesterone, alongside pheromonal communication. Species-specific sexual behaviours in cattle, pigs, sheep, goats, poultry and other livestock are examined in detail. Cows exhibit behaviours like mounting and vocalizations during oestrus, while bulls display libido and mating ability influenced by genetics and olfactory cues. Boars show complex mating behaviours affected by housing and social conditions, and goats and sheep respond to male presence with hormonal and behavioural changes driving ovulation and mating. Poultry courtship and mating are hormonally regulated, with social hierarchy influencing behaviour. The role of neurohormones such as dopamine and oxytocin in modulating sexual motivation and performance is also discussed. Understanding factors affecting sexual behaviour is essential for improving breeding management, addressing species-specific reproductive challenges and enhancing productivity and welfare in farm animals. This review provides insights into the behavioural and physiological mechanisms underlying sexual behaviour, supporting optimized reproductive strategies in diverse agricultural settings.

Keywords: Oestrous detection, Mating strategies, Reproductive behaviour, Reproductive hormones, Species-specific reproduction

Introduction

Sexual behaviour is a complex process regulated by the hormonal system and shaped by factors including social environment, sensory cues and sexual stimuli (Kumar *et al.*, 2024) ^[23]. Sexual behaviour consists of conscious and unconscious responses aimed at achieving sexual satisfaction, including phases such as desire, arousal, copulation and parental activities. Most of these reactions are conditioned by libido and presence of an object inducing sexual responses (Dixson, 2018) ^[9]. Individual animal species have specific sexual behaviours and different reproductive strategies. Sexual behaviour is influenced by an animal's species, sex and hierarchical position within the herd. Other factors include; internal (genetic determinants, age or experience) and environmental (photoperiod, temperature, nutrition and socio-sexual interactions) (Flis & Molik, 2024) ^[14]. The sexual behaviour depends on the pressure of changes in their living environment and anthropogenic factors (Gorski *et al.*, 2017) ^[17]. Sexual activity in male animals occur in the following order: courtship, erection and protrusion, mounting, intromission (inserting penis into vagina), ejaculation and dismounting. Males detect female species by sight or smell.

Discussion

Sexual behaviours are conceptualized into 2 categories: appetitive and consummatory. Appetitive sexual behaviour entails actions that increase the likelihood of mating to occur and

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Reflect sexual motivation. These include approach, solicitation or investigation of a potential mate and the exhibition of mate preference, or preference for an intact opposite-sex conspecific over a same-sex or gonadectomised conspecific. These behaviours are displayed by both sexes with some species-specific differences (specific solicitation behaviours differ between sexes). Consummator sexual behaviour entails the act of mating and is highly sexually dimorphic (Kendrick *et al.*, 2025). Sexual behaviour is controlled by gonadal steroid hormones, including androgens (testosterone), oestrogens (oestradiol) and progesterone (Jennings & De Lecce, 2020) ^[20]. Animals rely on pheromone signalling to communicate social information essential for reproductive behaviour. Below is a description of sexual behaviours in different farm animals including; cattle, goats, sheep, donkeys, camel, horse, rabbits, pigs and poultry.

Cattle

Cow

Female sexual behaviour begins before the Luteinizing Hormone (LH) surge that triggers ovulation. Components of female sexual behaviour are attractively, perceptivity and receptivity. Attractively refers to the female's value as a sexual stimulus and depends on stimuli passively emitted by females (pheromones) as well as their own behaviour. Perceptivity consists of appetitive activities displayed by females. An increase in motor activity forms the basis of the neck collar oestrus detection system and occurs around the time of the first sign of oestrus (actively sniffing another cow). A mixture of passive and active behaviours follows, culminating in receptivity. Cows in oestrus are agitated, vocalize and gather with other oestrous or PR oestrous females into a sexually active group (Dobson *et al.*, 2018) ^[10]. Oestrus is the period during which a female shows sexual receptivity in the presence of a mature male, allowing mating to occur. In cattle, it refers to a cow or heifer in standing heat, and accurate detection is key for effective reproductive management, as poor heat detection leads to management-related infertility. Oestrous behaviour is shown with lifting the tail, groaning, mounting other livestock, and being relaxed while mounted by other cattle or bull. Oestrous behaviour is followed by changes in the characteristics of the vulva such as red colour, swollen, and appearance of clear mucous. Cows sexual behaviours include mounting, standing-to-be-mounted, arching the back and vulva appearance (colour, swelling, secretion of mucus) (Baliarti *et al.*, 2020) ^[2]. Cows reared alone become restless, walk the fence and bawl when in heat while some go through the fence looking for a bull. Poor heat detection is attributed to factors such as insufficient time allocated daily for oestrus observation, with most mounting behaviour occurring at night. Mounting is brief, lasting 10 seconds or less, while conditions such as foot and leg disorders, slippery floors and environmental stressors suppress oestrus expression. The short duration of oestrus makes detection challenging in herds where many cows are pregnant, non-cycling or in the luteal phase (Fesseha & Degu, 2020) ^[12].

Bulls

Bull sexual behaviours include: Oro-nasal contact, flehmen, mounts orientation response, mounts and services (Baliarti *et al.*, 2020) ^[2]. Sexual behaviour in bulls is differentiated in two components: libido (sex drive) and ability to copulate (mating ability). Libido is the willingness and eagerness to mount and complete service of a female and mating ability as the ability

to complete service. Mating behaviour is exhibited before, during and after service. Both the libido and mating ability are influenced by genetic factors. Sexual behaviour in bull is innate since animals reared in complete isolation exhibit normal mating behaviour when exposed to an oestrous female. The bull is attracted into the sexually active group by sight of mounting activity within its ranks. Olfactory cues play an important role and the visual stimulus from a sexual partner is enhanced by olfactory signals released in the urine of a female in oestrus. Measurements of sex drives include number of ejaculations in an exhaustion test, reaction time (delay before ejaculation), proportion of failures to mount and proportion of failures to ejaculate (Kensal & Hardener Singh, 2023) ^[29]. The bull identify a PR oestrus cow 24 to 48 hours before oestrus and remains in her vicinity.

Goats

In small ruminants, reproductive seasonality is primarily controlled by photoperiod. During anestrus, females stop ovulating and their ovarian cycles are inactive. However, sexual activity is stimulated through socio-sexual interactions between males and females (Abecia *et al.*, 2024).

The “male effect” describes a socio-sexual response initiated by the sudden introduction of a male or males into a group of anoestrous goats. Close proximity between males and females triggers a rapid increase in luteinizing hormone (LH) secretion in females as an immediate response, which is followed by ovulation as a delayed response. Males influence LH release through chemo-signals which are mixtures of chemical compounds. As LH levels rise, follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH) levels also increase, leading to a first ovulation known as silent ovulation, which occurs about 48 hours after male introduction. Subsequent ovulations are accompanied by observable sexual behaviour, usually occurring 18 to 25 days after the introduction of the male (Abecia *et al.*, 2024) ^[1].

Sexual behaviour of goats is an important factor for flock breeding efficiency and productivity in goat farming. Males with higher libido and shorter reaction time have higher ejaculation efficiency in caprine species (Ponca *et al.*, 2022). Sexual behaviour is observed and quantified during courtship as well as during true mounting, observing morphological, physiological and behavioural signs in both bucks and does. Mating is triggered by the onset of oestrus in the female and the activation of sexual behaviour in the male. Initial copulations are centered in the first part of oestrus with repeats occurring in the latter part (Gaşpar *et al.*, 2023) ^[16]. Exposure to males triggers an increase in LH in non-oestrous females, followed by ovulation, with about 60% of goats exhibiting sexual behaviour at the time of first ovulation (Abecia *et al.*, 2024) ^[1]. Progesterone levels rise during oestrus, with the timing differing across species. In sheep, goats and cattle, expression of sexual behaviour during the reproductive period is preceded by the luteal phase which is characterised by high plasma progesterone levels. Oestradiol concentrations increase following regression of the corpus luteum and decline in progesterone. The “male-male effect”, in which a sexually active male is introduced to sexually inactive males, stimulates the secretion of LH and testosterone enhancing male sexual behaviour (Palacios *et al.*, 2023) ^[26]. Males stimulated by the “buck-to-buck effect” induce ovulatory and oestrous responses in females similar to those of males rendered sexually hyperactive by artificial photoperiodic cues (Abecia *et al.*, 2024) ^[1]. Females in heat become restless and cluster together with other females.

Within these groups, they display courtship-like behaviour and mount one another, which attracts males and stimulates their sexual activity (Flis & Molik, 2024) ^[14]. The main signs of oestrus in goats include; frequent bleating, holding the tail up and violently moving it, searching for a male, frequently urinating in small quantities stimulated by the presence of males, taking the mounting position allowing the male to perform intromission, oedema of the vulva and the presence of heat mucus (Gaspar *et al.*, 2023). Tail posture and movement are crucial indicators of female sexual attractively, perceptivity, and receptivity. Sexual attractively is the female's ability to stimulate male interest, perceptivity involves behaviour that initiate or maintain sexual interaction and receptivity refers to behaviour that permit the male to achieve intravaginal ejaculation. Male sexual arousal increases as female tail wagging becomes more frequent resulting in quicker mounting, increased ejaculation frequency and reduced intervals between ejaculations (Woods & Adcock, 2025) ^[32].

Bucks use smell, sight and sound as vital clues to find females who are in heat. Olfactory signals, particularly those pertaining to sexual and maternal behaviour, are more significant in goat flocks than they are in sheep flocks. The buck effect leads the females to secrete luteinizing hormone and cause synchronised ovulation. One of the primary indicators of a goat's identity with regard to reproductive state is how frequently they urinate. They also have tail glands and pedal glands that release smell signals. In response to non-volatile odours (pheromones), male goats engage in freshmen behaviour around females. Many animals exhibit this behaviour, which involves folding back the top lip and closing the nostril to expose the front teeth. This makes it easier for non-volatile substances (pheromones) to travel from the oral cavity to the vomeronasal (Jacobson's) organ, which in turn triggers normal reproductive activity (Singh *et al.*, 2023) ^[29]. The buck does considerable snorting and blowing when he detects a does in heat. The doe shows unrest and may be fought by other does.

Sheep

Sexual behaviour varies among males, with individual rams contributing unevenly to the offspring of a flock. Mating success of an individual ram depends on several factors, including breeding intensity, male competition and sexual interest. Sexual behaviour is initiated by an innate drive and follows a motor pattern that is influenced by foetal development, rearing conditions, and social pressures experienced during the mating season. In males, sexual behaviour is characterised by a precopulatory phase, followed by mounting, intromission, and ejaculation. For ewes, sexual behaviour has three distinguishable components: attractively, perceptivity and receptivity (Underfed & Alexander, 2024).

Sheep exhibit minimal visible signs of oestrus. In sheep and goats in heat, receptive behaviour is characterised by the tolerance reflex, in which the female stands still and allows others to mount her (Flis & Malik, 2024) ^[14]. Oestrous ewes raise their tails following physical contact with a ram but prior to copulation, indicating receptivity (Fierros-García *et al.*, 2018) ^[13].

Donkeys

The interovulatory interval is longer in donkeys (23– 26 days). Duration of the oestrous cycle varies with breeds, body condition scores, geographical location and time of the year. Oestrus lasts about 6 days, but it varies from 4 to 10 days and

diestrus lasts from 15 to 19 days. Ovulation takes place 1 day before ceasing signs of oestrus. Well-fed donkeys do not display seasonal anestrus; older Jennies display longer interovulatory intervals, a slower growth rate of the dominant follicle. Signs of oestrus in Jennies include standing to be mounted, a lowered head with ears back against the neck, clitoral winking, urination, mouth clapping and tail raising. The mouth clapping is the most typical and also the first and last oestrus sign in Jennies. Jennies kept on pastures congregate into a sexually active group similar to cows. In the sexually active group, the female in oestrus is mounted by other females coming in or out of oestrus. Inhaling urogenital secretions from one another followed by the Flagmen's response is a feature of sexually active groups. This jack-like behaviour is a normal species-specific behaviour in Jennies. Jennies in distrust do not stand to be mounted and may kick at the jack (Caisson *et al.*, 2021).

Camel

The mating behaviour of camel is different from the other ruminants indicating that male camel becomes aggressive during breeding period, show rut behaviour and difficult to handle. Signs of "rut" include grunting and gurgling sounds, frothy salivation and protrusion of the soft palate from the mouth resembling an elongated pouch. Other signs include a dark-brown odorous secretion from the poll glands, teeth grinding that produces a characteristic whistling sound, and the camel standing with its hind legs spread. Additional indicators are frequent urination with urine splashing, accompanied by up-and-down tail movements, as well as a reduction in body weight. Flagmen reaction behaviour of camel dromedary bull during is manifested after an-genital sniffing of she-camel by bull. Flagmen reaction is characterized by bull raising its head and curls the upper lip for few second after sniffing the female vulva. The bull makes the she-camel to assume a cosy position to enable him to achieve couched position. This is characterized by foreleg kicking and nuzzling to make her completely submissive for copulation while couched position was the typical sex position for camel. Camels mate in a couched position, with the entire mating process lasting about one hour. Copulation lasts approximately 10–20 minutes and involves three to four ejaculations. The bull directs the penis into vagina indicating complete intromission of penis into vagina. The camel stretches its neck and rubbing is done. Thrusting for ejaculation and blathering sound are vocal emission produced during this stage of copulation. Dromedary bull exhibit more sexual behaviour and libido when exposed to oestrus she-camel in the morning and evening than afternoon (Gaddafi *et al.*, 2022) ^[15].

Horse

Normal sexual behaviour and good libido ensure maximum reproductive efficiency in stallions. Factors influencing libido and mating ability in stallions are hereditary, environmental condition or learned patterns influenced by management. Sexual behaviour in stallions include freshmen, number of bites, kicks, sniffs, vocalizations reaction time, mount time and ejaculation time (Houssay *et al.*, 2020). The stallion bites or teases the mare in a kind of courtship many times for getting the mare into the mood to accept the male in copulation. Erection in the stallion is caused by gorging the penis with blood and the stallion has a complete erection when he mounts. Mares in heat squeal and urinate profusely in the presence of other horses. Her vulva "winks" (opens and closes) when she is in heat.

Rabbits

The buck mounts the doe and the doe lifts her rear to assist in copulation. When the penis enters the vagina, the male throws

his rear forward with his hind legs going up and ejaculates suddenly. The doe does not ovulate unless she is mated. When mated, she ovulates within 10 hours.

Table 1. Sow sexual behaviours in a breeding crate

Term	Definition
Standing still	The sow remains still for short periods not exceeding 10 consecutive seconds.
Standing reflex (locked up)	The sow maintains a rigid, immobile stand for more than 10 seconds in response to back pressure. This response occurs during boar exposure or mounting attempts and are accompanied by pricked ears, muscle stiffness or occasional trembling.
Latency to lock up	The duration between the application of back pressure and the onset of the standing reflex. In sows in oestrus, this response occurs within 30 seconds.
Pricked ears	Elevation of the ears from their resting position observed during sniffing or sexual interest. The ears are upright or positioned noticeably higher than normal.
Moving	Movement shown by the sow in response to applied back pressure observed before or after full oestrus expression.
Sniff	Active movement of the snout as the sow investigates odours in response to a nearby boar or pheromonal cues.
Chomping	Behaviour observed during nose-to-nose interaction with a boar or exposure to pheromones, where the sow opens and closes her mouth and protrudes her tongue while keeping her head level or raised, and aiding transfer of odours to the vomeronasal organ (VNO).
Vocalisation during stress	A high-pitched squeal emitted when the sow resists a boar or back pressure, typically associated with non-oestrus.
Vocalisation when chatting or chanting with the boar	A repetitive, low-pitched grunting sound produced in response to the presence, scent or sound of a boar, and not expressed by all sows.

(McGlone *et al.*, 2020) ^[25]

Poultry

Sex hormones influence aggressive and sexual behaviours differently in meat-type and egg-type chickens, with testosterone levels and androgen receptor expression linked to variations in aggression and mating behaviours (Lin *et al.*, 2024) ^[24]. Sexual behaviour in poultry is related to the cock which displays numerous courtship behaviours such as waltzing, wing flapping and tidbitting. These display serves several purposes and lead to mating and ejaculation of semen and deposition in the female cloaca. Hormones control sexual maturity, semen production and sexual behaviour in male broiler breeders. Testosterone is the primary sex hormone in the avian testis. Changes in the secretion of this hormone are correlated with testicular activity and sexual behaviour (El-Kazaz *et al.*, 2020) ^[11]. Physiologically, sexual behaviour is regulated by neurobiological and hormonal factors. In males, sexual activity is frequently observed in the afternoon, with about 10 to 30 mounts per day. Although egg production in females decline at this time, daily sperm production in males remains constant regardless of mating frequency. Social hierarchy influences sexual behaviour, with dominant males exhibiting more active mating behaviour than subordinate ones. Dominant males mate with females of higher social rank, as these females are less active and more readily accept mating. Heavier roosters display more frequent courtship and mating behaviours. Courtship behaviour prior to mating include wing movements and vocalisations directed towards females and is more expressed by subordinate males than dominant ones (Carvalho *et al.*, 2022) ^[6]. Stocking density and large group size affect sexual behaviour, as stress caused by competition for space leads to increased corticosteroid production, which interferes with normal social interactions. Early management practices during the weaner stage influence male sexual expression. When males and females are reared together in free-range systems, hens express normal mating behaviour, which is less evident in confined pen systems. In conventional production systems, reduced mating increase competition among roosters, leading to heightened stress and sexual aggression. Overall, sexual behaviour contributes to improved reproductive performance (Xiang *et al.*, 2021) ^[33]. A cock spreads one of his wings toward the

ground and scratch the wing feathers with one leg, performing a sort of dance (courtship waltz) around the hen. Sometimes the hen runs away but squat, allowing the cock to mount and copulate. After the courtship has developed properly, some females run from the cock, who chases them until they stop and squat for mating. The male stands on a squatting female and ejaculates semen as his rear descends toward the female's cloaca. Semen is ejaculated at the cloaca and the female draws it into her reproductive tract.

Factors affecting sexual behaviour in farm animals

1. Genetic, hormonal and physiological factors

Sexual behaviour is modulated by genetic predispositions and hormonal influences such as steroid hormones (testosterone, oestrogen), which regulate attractivity, proceptivity and receptivity behaviours in females and sexual performance in males. Neurohormones like dopamine, oxytocin, vasopressin and noradrenaline influence sexual motivation, attraction and arousal through their action and receptor availability in the brain, shaping mating systems and bonding behaviours (Tekin *et al.*, 2023) ^[30].

2. Environmental factors

Appropriate light exposure stimulates reproductive activity in animals. Light stimulates the eye's photoreceptors, activating the reproductive axis. Photoreceptors determine whether the rays change daily or seasonally and accordingly stimulate the reproductive axis (Chen *et al.*, 2020) ^[7]. Odour stimulates sexual behaviours in animals. Pheromones that come out with odours are perceived by the vomeronasal organ located in the noses of animals. The process is shaped by some hormonal and neural stimuli that result in the emergence of sexual behaviours (Rodewald *et al.*, 2019) ^[28]. Temperature affects reproductive parameters by hormonal mechanisms, where increased heat suppress sperm quality and ovarian activity, thereby influencing mating behaviour (Boni, 2019) ^[3].

3. Social and experience-related factors

Sexual experience and social exposure during development influence adult sexual behaviour. For example, male goats reared with females display more courtship behaviours, mounting attempts and ejaculations compared to those

isolated from females during upbringing (Gaşpar *et al.*, 2023)^[16]. Sexual stimulation by visual or physical stimuli (presence of a receptive female or observing mating conspecifics) enhances sexual performance in males, relevant for controlled breeding programs (Dias *et al.*, 2025)^[18].

Conclusion

This review highlights the diversity of sexual behaviour across various farm animal species, emphasizing that it is driven by intricate interactions of genetic, hormonal, physiological, environmental and social factors. Sexual behaviours are essential for reproductive success and are regulated by endocrine signals, sensory stimuli and socio-sexual interactions unique to each species. Understanding these multifaceted influences is critical for improving reproductive management and breeding efficiency in livestock, as well as addressing species-specific challenges such as heat detection in cows, libido in bulls and social stimulation in goats. The synthesis of behavioural patterns and underlying mechanisms across species provides a comprehensive foundation for optimizing animal welfare and productivity in agriculture.

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