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NORTHWEST WILDLIFE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Nuttall's cottontail rabbit

Sylvilagus nuttallii



By Aurora Hicks Beach

There are five species of rabbit and hare in Canada: the Arctic hare, which is the biggest species, the white tail jackrabbit that is actually a hare, the snowshoe hare, the eastern cottontail rabbit and the mountain cottontail, also known as Nuttall's cottontail rabbit.

Characteristics

Nuttall's cottontail rabbits are a medium sized rabbit. They grow to be between 35-39cm (13.8-15.4inches) in length and weigh around 0.7-1.2kg (1.5-2.6 lbs). Females are on average 5% larger than the males.

Their colouring is mostly greyish brown with a lighter side underneath and reddish brown hair on their hind legs. Their tail, although dark on top usually shows the white underside giving it a cotton ball look, hence its name. The ears are short and round with a signature black tip and fur on the inner ear

The species has a single annual molt, and so the animal does not change colour during winter.

Life Cycle

The Nuttall's cottontail rabbit mates between March and July, and usually at night. The species does not form pairing bonds.

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The gestation period is between 28-30 days and the females usually have between 4-8 kits, however, occasionally there can be as few as 2 and as many as 9. The female builds a nest of twigs, leaves, grass and lines it with her own fur. The species can have up to five litters a year.

The kits are born furless and blind, within a month the young are grown enough to explore outside. The rabbit can reach sexual maturity at 3 months. The average life span of the rabbit is 7 years.

Habitat

This species can be found from the southern interior part of British Columbia to southern California and east through Saskatchewan, Montana and New Mexico. However, it is most abundant in the western part of the US where it is legal to hunt.

The favoured habitat is wooded or brushy area on a slope or near a riverbank where there is long grass, willow and most importantly sagebrush. In areas of more sparse vegetation the rabbit can hide in rocky crevices.

Behaviour

The Nuttall's cottontail is a solitary animal, most likely due to the limited availability of food and shelter. The species doesn't hibernate but remains active throughout the year. It is crepuscular and so, active between dawn and dusk. It feeds in the open near brush cover and will not feed during heavy winds and rain as its senses will be damped and therefore more vulnerable to predators. The cottontail prefers grasses above other food sources, however, when grasses are scarce, the rabbit's major food sources are the sagebrush, juniper and juniper berries.

As there is such food and water scarcity, energy needs to be preserved. Therefore, throughout the mating season the rabbits only use 10% of their energy mating. After the mating season, males become more reclusive whilst the female retain the same amount of activity throughout the year.

When the animal is hunted or frightened, it runs a few metres to where it can hide and freeze, using its fur as camouflage. If it is still disturbed the animal will run in a zigzag pattern to deter predator

Threats

There are three subspecies of Nuttall's Cottontail rabbit, the sub species *Sylvilagus nuttallii nuttallii* found only in British Columbia is classed as species of Special Concern by the COSEWIC and is on the CDC blue list. The species has been placed on the blue list due to a lack of understanding of the species. There is a scarcity and limited distribution of the species, this is likely due to habitat loss and low recruitment as the species is at the northern extreme of its range.

Due to its prolific breeding, many species depend on the Nuttall's cottontail rabbit as a source of food. Predators include bobcats, coyotes, foxes, weasels, owls and hawks.

What We Can Do To Help

- Preserve wetland habitats by not draining or filling in wetland.
- Leave fallen trees in wooded areas where they fall – a dead tree has more living organisms and wildlife in it than a live tree, and the ground needs the decaying material back to help nurture new trees.
- Do not litter on land or in the water. Help clean up the environment – see <http://www.northwestwildlife.com/gcsc2004.php> for an article on the NWPS involvement in the "Great Canadian Shoreline Cleanup" campaign.

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- Dispose of toxic substances such as antifreeze, batteries, and paint responsibly. Municipalities usually provide special disposal facilities for these types of things, as putting them down drains can be extremely toxic.
- Reuse and recycle whenever possible.
- Buy organic food – this supports farmers who are trying to preserve the environment by not using chemical pesticides and herbicides.
- Plant native plant species in your garden. See <http://www.stanleyparkecology.ca/programs/public/ivyBusters.php> for background on the introduced species English Ivy killing trees in Stanley Park.
- Do not feed wild animals. A wild animal can become dependent on humans for food and will become violent and attack humans when this food is not available. This is usually fatal to the animal because humans will kill an attacking animal.
- Volunteer to help organizations like the Northwest Wildlife Preservation Society.
- Take the time to learn about wildlife. Take a walk and observe the wildlife around where you live.

Other Interesting Facts

Like all lagomorphs, the cottontail rabbit consumes its food via coprophagy. In order to digest its food properly, the food must pass through the rabbits system twice. That means that the rabbit eats the grass and then it eats its faeces in order to get the extra nutrients from the food.

Bibliography

Web Resources:

Brief description of a mountain cottontail

http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Sylvilagus_nuttallii/

Detail of Nuttall's cottontail in B.C.

<https://sierraclub.bc.ca/nuttalls-cottontail/>

Concise description of Mountain Cottontails

<http://imnh.isu.edu/digitalatlas/bio/mammal/Lagom/moco/moco.htm>

Mountain cottontail

http://www.theanimalfiles.com/mammals/rabbits_hares_pikas/mountain_cottontail.html

Photograph

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<http://www.factzoo.com/mammals/cottontails-american-reproduction-specialists-white-tails.html>

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