

Cottontail rabbits in the City

Sylvilagus spp.

Identification:

Small to mid sized rabbits with a stubby tail with a white underside that shows when they move away.



Natural history:

Cottontails are found throughout North, Central and South America and have adapted to a variety of habitats. They live on the outer edges of open spaces, and the abundance of groomed city lawns have provided great food and shelter for them. They are food to many animals; babies are very vulnerable so only 20-25% of a rabbit population survives in an area every year.

Diet:

Spring and summer they feed on grasses, herbs and vegetables. In winter they add bark, buds and twigs. They typically browse between dusk and dawn, and remain hidden during the day.

Breeding:

Rabbits are legendary breeders, reproducing up to 5 times a year! A female rabbit can become pregnant the same day she gives birth. Breeding occurs from February to September with a 28 day gestation period. There are typically 3-4 young, born completely hairless and helpless. Most young will not survive. Rabbits give birth in shallow ground nests that the mother will make with fur and dead grasses. They will make a “cap” of fur and grass to help hide the babies. Babies are dependant on their mothers for about 20 days and reach maturity at three months.



Behavior in an urban environment:

Rabbits are well adapted for detecting and fleeing predators. They have exceptional hearing; their ears can pivot independently to listen all around them. They even listen for danger when sleeping. Eyes on the sides on their heads create a wide range of sight. They have the ability to sit perfectly still and depend on their camouflage. People often don't see them until the rabbit runs. Their large feet and powerful legs propel them up to 20 mph in a zig zag pattern to avoid capture.

Rabbits commonly browse in parks, neighborhood lawns and flower and vegetable gardens. They can nest near high use areas, nests are often damaged or destroyed when mowed over or walked on. There are fewer predators in urban environments and populations can get large. Rabbit activity is more noticeable during winter when they begin to eat twigs and buds off low shrubs. Look for neatly snipped branch ends less than two feet off the ground.

Benefits:

As abundant animals low on the food chain, rabbits are key prey in urban ecosystems. Hawks, owls, eagles, foxes, raccoons, snakes and coyotes eat rabbits. Observing rabbits is an easy way to watch and enjoy wildlife in your backyard. Note that many lawn chemicals can be toxic to rabbits.

Protecting your gardens:

Rabbit-proof fencing is the best method to keep rabbits out of your garden.

1. Use at least 36 inches wide chicken wire or hardware cloth.
2. Dig a trench (6 inches deep) around garden.
3. Wrap and stake chicken wire around the area to be protected.
4. Bend bottom of the chicken wire into an “L” shape and push into the trench. Fill in with soil.
5. Bend the top outwards to discourage climbing over.
6. Chemical repellants (that smell or taste bad) include Ropel®, fox urine, used cat litter, cayenne pepper. These must be reapplied periodically. Many different repellants have been tried and the success is variable.
7. Inspect and maintain fence regularly.
8. Remove wood piles or other potential hiding places in your yard.
9. Let dog out to chase rabbits away, they are difficult to catch so rabbit will leave and your dog will get some exercise!

What to do if you find a baby rabbit: (always wear gloves if you must handle any wild animal)

1. Keep pets away, baby rabbits are very vulnerable.
2. If it has fur and its eyes are open, leave it alone.
3. If you have to chase it to catch it, its fine, so you leave it alone.
4. If it is furless and has closed eyes, look for nearby nest. Look for small pile of grass, twigs and fur. Replace the baby in the nest. If the nest is in an unsafe location, you can move it up to 10 feet away.
5. Babies are fed at night, so you won't see mom near them during the day. If babies look warm and comfortable they are being taken care of.



What to do if the mother has been killed, the babies have no fur and are orphaned. If they have fur they can survive without mother.

1. Minimize handling, they can die from stress.
2. Place in a dark box lined with old t-shirts, keep covered. Keep it in a quiet area. You do not need to add heat.
3. Take to a wildlife rehabilitator as soon as possible. (See list of wildlife rehabilitators in the area)
4. Do not feed them, cow milk can be fatal.

Do bunnies with fur ever need help?

If a rabbit is acting strangely, it is not running away or is noticeably injured, put in a dark box and take to a rehabilitator. You can tell if it is dehydrated by pulling up the skin on the neck. If it “tents” up instead of falling back down after you let go it needs help. If you see bleeding, broken limbs, maggots, or convulsions take it to a vet or rehabilitator for help. Do not give it water or milk.

Relocating rabbits:

This is not recommended. Rabbits are territorial. If a rabbit is removed, other animals quickly move into its territory. Relocation usually results in the animals' death. They often can't find food, water or shelter in the new location and are more likely hit by cars, killed by other animals or injured by people or pets. Additionally they are such good breeders that it is unlikely to be a successful method of reducing your rabbit population.

Is it legal?

Colorado Division of Wildlife allows relocation from personal property to a location no farther away than 10 miles from the catch site. You must also have approval from the land owner at the relocation site.

YOU MAY NOT RELOCATE RABBITS ONTO FEDERAL, STATE OR CITY PARK LAND OR OPEN SPACE.

Resources

Urban wildlife rescue, <http://www.urbanwildliferescue.org/humane/squirrels.htm>

Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sylvilagus>

National Geographic, <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/cottontail-rabbit.html>

Maryland Cooperative Extension, “Wildlife Management: Cottontail Rabbits”,
<http://extension.umd.edu/publications/PDFs/FS601.pdf>

Beaulieu, David, Wild Rabbit Control,
http://landscaping.about.com/cs/pests/a/easter_rabbit_2.htm

Colorado State University extension, <http://www.extension.org/faq/1539>

House rabbit society, <http://www.rabbit.org/faq/sections/orphan.html>

