

Rabbits and Hares

by Sally Cureton

When people talk about rabbits they are actually referring to three separate and distinct animals. First is the domesticated rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) which is only distantly related to the wild rabbit and belongs to its own genus. The second one that is often referred to is the jackrabbit or the hare. These are both in the same genus, (*Lepus*). The third is the wild rabbit. While there are 14 species of rabbits, the one that is the most common is the Eastern Cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*). That is the one found in the wooded areas of Massanutten. One clear difference between rabbits and hares is in their newborns. Rabbits are altricial. Their young are born blind and hairless. Hares are born precocial, with hair and able to see.

While rabbits and hares are closely related to rodents, they actually belong to their own order, (*Leporidae*). The difference is that unlike rodents, these animals have two sets of incisor teeth, one behind the other. Both sets of teeth grow continually. Cottontails have large, powerful hind legs, a body about 8 inches long and weigh between 2 and 4 pounds. The Eastern Cottontail found here can have ears up to 4 inches long helping to enable them to have very sharp hearing. They also have large eyes on the sides of their heads. Those eyes can even be used to scan the sky to look for overhead threats. Add to this a keen sense of smell and it would seem that they could spot a predator at any time. But, alas in the wild they generally will live for only about a year. Cottontails molt twice a year and do not turn white in the winter.

All rabbits except the Eastern Cottontail live in an underground burrow. Like hares, the Eastern Cottontail lives on top of the ground in a simple nest. They make their homes in thickets, swamps, meadows, forest edges and openings in the woods. Rabbits live in groups and have a complex social structure. They will rarely leave their home territory where they know all the best food sources and escape routes. When being chased by a predator a rabbit can put on a burst of speed of up to 18 miles per hour and dart off in a zigzag pattern. Generally they will dash for cover and become absolutely immobile. Few animals are able to sit so unmoving for as long as a rabbit.

Of course, they are well-known for their high reproductive rate. An average female Eastern Cottontail will have 4 litters year. The first one will be born in early March and the last in September. Each litter will average between 2 and 7. The babies are known as kits and are weaned when they are about half grown. According to one study, the average female rabbit will give birth to 25 kits in one year. They feed on leafy plants in the spring and summer months and on buds and bark in the winter.

Rabbits are well known in literature as a symbol of fertility, as well as an association with spring and Easter as the Easter Bunny. In folklore, they are often portrayed as tricksters such as Bugs Bunny. They have been depicted in other works in various roles such as the White Rabbit and the March Hare in Lewis Carroll's books. And we all know about the Playboy Bunny. Since rabbits actually have a very playful nature, perhaps this is a logical association.

