

Rabbits



USFWS

Few animals are as content to sit unmoving for as long as rabbits are. As prey animals, rabbits go to extremes not to advertise themselves as available to be eaten—but that isn't

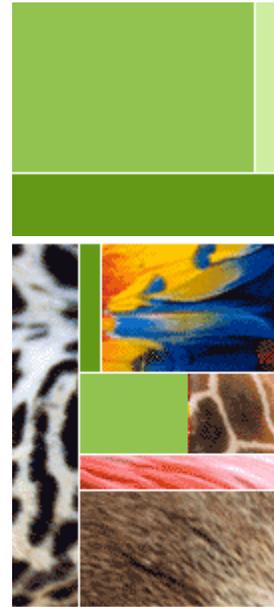
to say they don't let their guard down once in a while. If lucky, the patient observer may see them in the early morning or evening hours in spirited and spontaneous chases of other rabbits, or energetically hopping and leaping about—revealing this animal's playful nature. While rabbits lead lives full of concern and fear, they sometimes display a *joie de vivre* that we can envy.

Rabbits are commonly misunderstood to be rodents, but they actually belong to their own order and are properly called lagomorphs. Lagomorphs are found in both the Old and New Worlds, with the New World species distinguished between "true" rabbits (genus *Sylvilagus*) and hares and jackrabbits (genus *Lepus*). While many people mistakenly believe that wild rabbits and domesticated pet rabbits are the same species, the truth is that the domesticated rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) belongs to another genus entirely and is only distantly related to his wild brethren.

Of the wild species in the United States, there are 14 species of true rabbits, of which the eastern cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) is the most widely distributed and familiar. Eastern cottontails have been introduced to the Pacific Northwest and are widespread enough throughout the South and Midwest to make the descriptor "eastern" misleading. Cottontails vary in color from gray to brown and have large hind feet and ears—which also function as body heat regulators, since rabbits don't pant or sweat—and short fluffy tails. They vary in size, but on the whole are rather small animals, averaging about a foot long and weighing just two to three pounds. Rabbits are *crepuscular*, meaning they're most active at dusk and dawn.

Cottontails are generally found in brushy hedgerows and the edges of wooded areas with dense cover, but they also do well in suburban and urban areas where lawns, gardens, and various shrubs meet their habitat requirements. Rabbits feed on leafy plants during the growing season and the buds and bark of woody plants in the winter. Besides the plants essential to their diet, rabbits also need safe resting places and cover in which to escape from predators.

Famous for their breeding abilities, cottontails breed from February through September in the north. Gestation is about 28 days. Three to four litters of four or five young ("bunnies") are born each year.



Young are born helpless in a shallow depression lined with grass and mother's fur, but they grow rapidly and are weaned when less than half the size of the adult.

They may live up to two years in the wild, but where predators are numerous they seldom survive more than one year. However, it is important to recognize the role that predation plays in keeping rabbit populations in balance. Hawks and owls are important avian predators, and foxes, raccoons, skunks, and opossums are mammals that prey on rabbits.

 E-MAIL THIS PAGE

 SHARE 

 [Solving Problems with Rabbits](#)

