



Wildlife Notes

Black-tailed jackrabbit (*Lepus californicus*)

Description

The black-tailed jackrabbit is common to the western United States and Mexico and can be found at elevations from sea level to 10,000 feet (3,000 m). Approximately two feet in length and weighing 3 to 6 pounds, the black-tailed jackrabbit is the third largest North American hare (after the antelope jackrabbit and the white-tailed jackrabbit).

Habitat

Black-tailed jackrabbits occupy mixed shrub-grassland terrains and do not migrate or hibernate during winter. They inhabit one range year-round, usually 0.4 to 1.2 square miles in size.

Diet

Shrubs generally comprise the bulk of fall and winter diets, while grasses and forbs are eaten in spring and early summer. In the dry climates of New Mexico dry grasses, cactus, bark and twigs (mesquite, catclaw, rabbitbrush and other shrubs) are primary food sources. When rain occurs, sprouting green plants become the favored forage. Even though livestock compete with jackrabbits for green forage, this is not deter the jackrabbit. Wherever land has been overgrazed by cattle and the perennial grasses become replaced by mesquite or cactus, jackrabbit populations increase.

Breeding

Breeding usually peaks in spring, but may continue year-round in warm climates. Newborns are fully furred with eyes open and become mobile within minutes after birth. Therefore, females do not protect or stay with the young, except during nursing. Litter sizes average four rabbits, but vary from two to seven.

Predators

Black-tailed jackrabbits are important prey for raptors and carnivorous mammals, such as eagles, hawks, owls, coyotes, foxes, and wild cats. When rabbit populations are small, increased livestock predation sometimes occurs. This poses ranchers a strange paradox—though rabbits compete with livestock for green forage, their presence reduces livestock loss from predation.

Disease

If not for disease we might be overrun by jackrabbits. Tularemia, a bacterial disease commonly known as “rabbit fever,” can quickly decimate an entire population which may require several years to become reestablished. Rabbits also host a variety of fleas, ticks, lice, and mites. For this reason, many avoid hunting or trapping black-tailed jackrabbits.

