



Forestry fun fact: February 2018

Snowshoe hare (*Lepus americanus*)

The snowshoe hare also called the varying hare, or snowshoe rabbit, is a species of hare found in North America. It has the name “snowshoe” because of the large size of its hind feet and the marks its tail leaves in the snow. The animal’s feet prevent it from sinking into the snow when it hops and walks. Their feet also have fur on the soles to protect it from freezing temperatures. With the onset of winter, their coat turns snow white, with the exception of black eyelids and ear tips. When the snow begins to melt in the spring, their coat begins to turn brown, and the complete change takes place over a period of ten weeks.

Habitat

Cover is a vital component of snowshoe hare habitat. The presence of cover is the primary determinant of habitat quality, and is more significant than food availability or species composition. Species composition does, however, influence population density, dense softwood understories support greater snowshoe hare density than hardwoods because of cover quality. In north central, Washington, most unburned, burned, or scarified clear cuts will normally be fully occupied by snowshoe hares within six or seven years, as vegetation becomes dense. Winter snowshoe hare counts were highest in 20-year old lodgepole pine stands, lower in older lodgepole stands, and lowest in spruce-dominated stands.

Diet

Food habits of snowshoe hare tend to vary according to weather conditions. To a large extent, they forage on green grasses, bluegrass, forbs, brome, asters, vetches, jewelweed, wild strawberry, dandelions, daisies, clovers and horsetails. They can be spotted eating new growth of trembling birches, aspen and willows. Through the sparse winter months, they consume buds, twigs, bark and evergreens. If need be, they have been known to feed on the dead remains of conspecifics. Rabbits and hares re-ingest their droppings to further digest the material, a process called coprophagy. After returning to their shelters, they pass soft pellets containing undigested vegetation, which is rich in protein and vitamin B.

Reproduction

The breeding season for rabbits begins in mid-February and can continue through late summer. Famous for their reproductive abilities, rabbits have a 30-day gestation period, and have several litters containing four to eight young each year. For about two weeks, the mother rabbit stays away from the nest so as not to show predators the location of the young, returning only at dusk and dawn to nurse and lick her young clean. At two weeks of age, the young rabbits begin to eat vegetation. At four to five weeks old, they are feeding alongside their mother.

Predators

The known predators of the adult snowshoe hare are hawks, owls, fishers, American martens, domestic dogs, wolves, coyotes, mountain lions, foxes, and bobcats. Vehicles also kill many rabbits. Young in nests are vulnerable to weed-eaters, lawn mowers, hay mowers, and other agricultural equipment. In order to evade such a long list of predators, they have perfected a number of escape techniques. One of them is to “freeze” in their tracks when a threat is perceived. Given their fantastic summer and winter camouflage, this method is quite effective. Apart from this while fleeing they can confuse a pursuing predator by skillful changes in direction and vertical leaps. Another interesting fact about snowshoe hares is that in order to escape from predators, they often take an occasional dip or swim, thanks to the fact they are extremely talented swimmers. Rabbits may live two or more years in the wild, but when predators are numerous and weather conditions are extreme, they seldom live more than a year.

Did you know?

Unlike rabbits, snowshoe hares are born with their eyes open and are fully furred; begin hopping when they are one day old. They become excellent runners and cover the distance of 10 feet in one leap. Their average speed is 27 mph while escaping predators.

Snowshoe hares get the cue to change their fur coat color from the pineal gland. It is located in the brain and is able to sense changes in the daylight lengths.

Rabbits differ from hares in that female rabbits give birth to blind, hairless young that require considerable attention for their first two weeks of life. Hares are born fully furred with their eyes open, and can hop about within hours of their birth.



This picture taken in Tumble Creek