

White-tailed Jackrabbit

Lepus townsendii BY TOM DICKSON



NEAL & MI WISHLER

While we're hunting late-season pheasants, my dog often flushes what at first look like small, white deer. The creatures burst from sagebrush or brushy ravines and race across the landscape. As a pup, Simon tried to catch them, but after a dozen failed attempts he gave up and now runs half-heartedly for only a few hundred yards. The white-tailed jackrabbits, which can outrun any dog except a greyhound, slow down too, bounding along just ahead of him.

IDENTIFICATION

Jackrabbits are technically hares, not rabbits, though both look similar and belong to the same family, Leporidae. Hares are generally larger and faster than rabbits and have

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longer ears and feet. In addition, hares are solitary animals (except during breeding season), while rabbits live in social groups. Another difference is that rabbits are born blind, hairless, and helpless, while newborn hares have hair, can see, and are able to move about. Both rabbits and hares have short tails and breed prolifically. White-tailed jackrabbits bear up to four litters of four or five young each year.

Montana has four true rabbits—pygmy rabbit, desert cottontail, mountain cottontail, and eastern cottontail—and three hares—white-tailed jackrabbit, black-tailed jackrabbit, and snowshoe hare.

The whitetail is yellowish-gray, has a distinct white tail, and turns all white in winter except for its ear tips, which remain black. The blacktail is gray to blackish, has a black tail, and does not change color in winter.

White-tailed jackrabbits are one of the world's largest hares, second only to the Alaskan hare. They are 2 feet long from their nose to their 3- to 4-inch-long stubby tail, and weigh 6 to 10 pounds.

Because of the animals' large ears, early settlers called them "jackass rabbits," later shortened to jackrabbit. Its large ears allow a jackrabbit to hear exceptionally well. Also, the ears are filled with blood vessels that release body heat in summer, keeping the animal cool when temperatures rise.

HABITAT AND RANGE

White-tailed jackrabbits live in grasslands and shrublands throughout Montana except in the far northwest. They are most common in open grassland plains east of the

Continental Divide. (In Montana, black-tailed jackrabbits live only in the state's far southwestern corner.) Though information on white-tailed jackrabbits is scarce, the population appears to be doing fine.

SPEED

Like the pronghorn, whose open grassland range it shares, the white-tailed jackrabbit relies on eyesight and speed to avoid coyotes, bobcats, foxes, golden eagles, and other predators. A frightened jackrabbit can cover 30 feet in one leap and reach speeds of up to 35 mph in short bursts. As it bounds along, it regularly jumps 3 to 4 feet high, apparently to get a better view of its pursuer. When captured by a predator, a jackrabbit fights back by kicking with its powerful hind legs.

HABITS

During the day, a white-tailed jackrabbit rests in a "form," a shallow pit in the earth under grass clumps or shrubs. It hides there all day, ears flat on its back. Jackrabbits begin foraging in the low light of evening, hopping across open areas or following trails made by other jackrabbits through sagebrush. Foraging continues all night, especially when the moon is out. In early morning jackrabbits return to resting forms to wait out the day.

FOOD

Jackrabbits are herbivores that eat grasses and forbs (flowering plants) in spring and summer and the buds, twigs, and bark of woody shrubs in winter. They also eat crops such as alfalfa, making them pests to some farmers. Like other hares (and rabbits), jackrabbits eat their initial feces, which are soft, green, and rich in B vitamins. Subsequent feces, dry and dark brown with no nutritional value, are not consumed. 🐰