

Snowshoe Hare

Lepus americanus

The snowshoe hare is a four-legged hamburger on the menu of most every mid-sized forest predator that walks or flies. I saw this firsthand one November day in the Great Bear Wilderness while walking up a snow-dusted trail through an open stand of lodgepole pine. Rounding a bend, I was startled to see a snowshoe hare, already in white pelage, sprinting up the trail at me. It raced right past me like I wasn't even there. As it turned out, I was the hare's salvation. Down the trail from where the hare had come, I saw a large pine marten hop onto a fallen pine, foiled in its pursuit of supper.

A PREY'S LIFE The hare's prominent, snowshoelike rear feet leave one of the most recognizable and abundant tracks across Montana's forested landscape.

Often those tracks are of a fleeing hare, like the one I saw running from the marten. Adult snowshoe hares (the name comes from the Old English word for the animal, *hara*) rely on speed and agility to avoid predators—lynx, coyotes, weasels, owls, ravens, and hawks.

Juvenile hares, too slow to outrace predators, try to remain motionless to avoid detection. Still, the vast majority of young hares are eaten before they live a year. For all their speed, adults don't do much better: On average, more than half die each year. Thus, hares must produce multiple and abundant

litters to maintain their population.

Hare populations often rise

and fall in regular nine- or ten-year cycles related to predator numbers and food supply.

Hares are not vocal, but they sometimes make clicking, grunting, or whining sounds. They also squeal in terror when attacked by a predator.

APPEARANCE Although the hare looks like a large cottontail rabbit, the two species are in different genera. Hares don't build nests or burrows, their young are precocial—born with furred bodies and open eyes—and they have a differently structured skull than rabbits.

Fur is another difference. Unlike a rabbit's, the hare's coat changes color seasonally, undergoing a spring and fall molt. In summer, the coat is rusty brown above and white underneath. This mottled pelage, or fur coloration, provides some camouflage in summer. Adults have white feet, a white-tipped nose, and white hairs around the edge and inside of their ears. The winter pelage appears all white (hiding the hare in snow) but is actually tri-colored: The fur closest to the body is dark gray, the middle fur is brown, and the visible outer fur is pure white.

Snowshoe hares weigh between 2 and 2.5 pounds and average about 17 inches long. The tail is 2 inches, the ears 3 inches, and the namesake hind feet can reach 6 inches.

FOOD HABITS In summer, hares

mainly eat grasses, ferns, and succulent green plants. After the first frost, they switch to woody vegetation such as mountain maple and lodgepole pine needles.

Snowshoe hares aren't highly regarded by tree growers, because they can kill saplings in tree farms, especially in winter.

Hares are coprophagous, which means they produce two kinds of pellets, soft and hard. They eat their soft pellets, produced during the day, to extract additional nutrients. During the night, snowshoe hares deposit hard pellets.

REPRODUCTION Snowshoe hares first breed each year in March or April. Their odd mating behavior is unlike that of any other native North American animal. First, the male hare approaches and sniffs the female. Then he jumps in the air, urinating on her from midair. The female sometimes does the same to the male. Finally, they retreat to the brush to copulate.

The gestation period is just over one month. First litters are usually produced from mid-April to May, and then the mating season begins again. Females average two or three litters per year. In northwestern Montana, females produce an average of 8 young per female per year.

Newborn hares weigh only 1.5 ounces when born but grow quickly, attaining adult weight within 3 to 5 months. If they survive 12 months, they are ready to breed.



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HABITAT The snowshoe hare ranges across the northern United States and Canada. Hares prefer dense, second-growth forests, especially lodgepole pine interspersed with fir and spruce. Snowshoes live throughout the coniferous forests of western Montana and at higher elevations in many central Montana mountains. With their large feet, they are adapted to live in deep-snow environments.

HUMAN USE While cross-country skiing, I've often seen snowshoe hare "runs"—narrow, tightly packed trails running through lodgepole thickets. Trappers sometimes set snares in the runs to catch hares for the pelts or for use as bait to trap martens or bobcats. Most likely, early Native Americans also keyed in on these runs to snare hares, which were an important winter food source. 🐰

BY JOHN FRALEY

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