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Living with...

## Cottontail Rabbits



Urban Wildlife Series

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RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED



## About Cottontail Rabbits

The most common rabbit in much of the U.S., the eastern cottontail is primarily nocturnal, but is also often seen during the daylight. This species feeds on many different plants, mainly herbaceous varieties in summer and woody varieties in winter.



During the breeding season, males fight one another and perform dance-like courtship displays before the territorial females. These displays involve face-offs and much jumping, including females jumping over males. Individuals often jump straight up into the air, and pairs or small groups often engage in active chases. It is very entertaining to see the rabbits' courtship "dance".

The female rabbit creates a nest for her babies by making a shallow indentation in the ground called a scrape. She lines this scrape with dry grass and fur plucked from her chest. This creates a warm, dry, water-repellent, comfortable resting place for the babies. These nests are frequently constructed in the middle of a lawn, in the open, to the amazement of homeowners. Cottontails are accustomed to prairie life before the proliferation of man, and the tall grasses of the prairie protected the nest. Rabbits may not realize that people have replaced most of the natural grasses with short, mowed grass, or they may have no other natural place to have their young. They may have their young in a yard, despite the presence of a household pet.

Mammal babies whose eyes are closed have no odor, so predators cannot smell them. Predators can, however, watch the mother and follow her to the nest when she nurses her young. As the babies grow and develop they begin to wiggle in the nest and this movement also attracts some predators. When a nest of bunnies is discovered people wrongly think that, because humans have touched them, rehabilitators must now raise them. This is an old wives' tale. The mother rabbit will continue to feed and groom her litter of young despite the scent of

human hands.

Cottontail females are the sole providers for their young. Because rabbits are true herbivores they must forage almost constantly to obtain adequate nourishment. Rabbits are induced ovulators so they mate shortly after giving birth to a litter. A female must eat enough to sustain herself, feed her babies, and nourish her gestating litter. This leaves her only enough time to nurse her bunnies once or twice a day. She typically does this at night, and it only takes three to five minutes per feeding.

Cottontails are not physically able to move their young either with their mouths or with their feet, so if an occupied nest is suddenly empty, it has most likely been predated. Mothers generally cannot find a nest of bunnies that has been moved.

Bunnies leave the nest and the care of their mothers when they are three to four weeks old. At this time their eyes are open, they are eating grass and more importantly, weeds. Their ears are erect, they are fluffy, and they can run; however, their first line of defense is the same mechanism which has protected them in the prairie or the forest, standing silently, unmoving. A frozen bunny sits perfectly still, can be approached and even picked up, because he thinks he cannot be seen. If he remains quiet in the hands of a human this is a sure indication that he is in shock and will die unless he is released.

### Rabbit Facts

- Rabbits will continue to care for their babies even if the babies have been touched by humans.
- The female rabbits feeds her young for only about 5 minutes twice a day.
- Bunnies are weaned and on their own by 3 weeks of age.
- Bunnies born in a lawn or garden will not remain there as adults. The young will disperse within six to eight weeks.
- Only 10% of the bunnies born in the wild survive.

### When To Rescue A Rabbit

- Rabbits always need help if they are cold, injured, bleeding, or if there are flies around. An adult that can be easily approached needs immediate help. An orphaned/injured animal needs to be kept warm and quiet to prevent further damage. Never give the animal anything to eat or drink. Doing so can cause permanent damage and even death.
- Don't assume because you don't see the mother at the nest, that the babies have been orphaned. A mother rabbit only feeds her young twice a day, and otherwise stays away from the nest to prevent predators from noticing it. To determine whether or not bunnies are orphaned, place dental floss over the nest in a tic-tac-toe pattern, overlapping the nest by several inches. If the floss pattern has been disturbed after 24 hours, the mother is feeding the bunnies, and the nest should be left alone.

Another way to determine if baby bunnies are being fed is to feel the tummy of each bunny. If the tummy is slightly rounded, the mother is feeding the babies; if the tummy is sunken, something has happened to the mother, and the bunnies need to be admitted to rehabilitation.

- If the baby bunnies are being fed, but there is a fear that a domestic dog or cat may disturb the nest, place one half of a small dog or cat carrier over the nest, and weigh it down with a large brick. The half opening of the carrier will allow the mother rabbit to slip under to feed her babies, but will keep most predators out. This arrangement allows the mother and babies to be protected, until the babies are old enough to be on their own.
- Leave bunnies alone if they have fur and are out of the nest.
- Moving a bunny nest means certain death, the mother will not be able to find it, even if it's only a small distance away from her original nest.

### Discouraging Rabbits In Your Yard and Garden

- Cottontails prefer weeds and native plants to garden vegetables, so leaving a small "rabbit patch" for them is sometimes the best way to protect ornamental flowers.
- Baby powder can protect flowers and plants from the nibbling of rabbits, as can several other commercial products.
- Coyote urine can be purchased at hunting stores and can be used as a garden repellent against rabbits.
- Some natural plants, such as marigolds, planted around the perimeter of a garden, will deter rabbits.
- Consider a short, chicken wire fence around your vegetable garden to keep rabbits out.
- For nuisance problems, live-trapping and relocating is NOT the humane solution. During spring and summer you will likely be separating a mother from her babies, leaving them to starve. This is a very cruel consequence of trapping wildlife. Please have compassion when they may cause you some inconvenience in their simple efforts to survive.

### Other Information

Cottontail bunnies are difficult for rehabilitators to raise because they die easily of stress related disorders. Their digestive systems are not fully understood so a truly appropriate diet is not available. In almost every situation, the mother rabbit is still a bunny's best chance for survival.

As with other wildlife, cat-caught bunnies almost always die from the bacteria in the mouth of the cat. Even if there is no visible damage from the cat, their needle like teeth can often inject bacteria into the fragile skin of a bunny. Even if a cat only mouths a bunny, this can be fatal because the bacteria-laden saliva can be groomed off and ingested by the bunny. For the well-being of our native wildlife, and the safety of your pet, please consider keeping domestic cats inside.