

Eastern Cottontail Rabbit

COOL FACTS:

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| Scientific name: | <i>Sylvilagus floridanus</i> |
| Average weight: | 1.1 kg (2.5 lb) |
| Average length: | 45 cm long (17 inches) |
| Speed: | To escape predators, they can reach speeds up to 29 km/hr (19 mph) |
| Lifespan: | Average lifespan in the wild is 3 years. |

PHYSIOLOGY

Several species of cottontails inhabit North America, but here in Eastern Ontario, the familiar "bunny rabbit" is the Eastern Cottontail. Their dense coat is a greyish-brown with black-tipped guard hairs. Perhaps the most familiar mark is the short white puffy tail (the cotton tail).

They are best known for their white fluffy tail but their coat is greyish brown. Their underside is usually white. They have excellent vision, sense of smell and hearing. The Eastern Cottontail has large brown eyes that are set high on its head. Each eye can move more than half a circle.

Rabbits are generally quiet animals, although they may occasionally emit a few low grunts or squeals. Their primary form of communication is by stamping their hind feet.

HABITAT/BEHAVIOUR

Rabbits like living on the edge. Edge habitat, that is, where thickets, hedgerows, or treed areas meet old fields, agricultural lands or grassy meadows. Although they can be found in very open woodlands, this is not a typical habitat. Some form of escape cover is essential and rabbits never move too far away from brush piles, thickets, rock piles and burrows, which provide easy shelter from their many predators. Any landscape that supplies a combination of the above is considered good from a rabbit's perspective.

These solitary animals are largely crepuscular (animals that are active primarily during twilight - the periods before dawn and after dusk) and nocturnal. However, cold weather often prompts daytime activity. During the day, rabbits spend long hours sitting in one spot, sleeping, grooming, and occasionally standing up or nibbling some nearby food. They often return to the same location day after day. The shallow impression created by their body weight is called a "form."

Eastern Cottontails can have 3 to 5 litters in one year. The breeding starts in late February to early March and continues until September. Females give birth in shallow ground nests to young so helpless that perhaps only 15 percent survive their first year. A litter produces 3 to 8 young each time. The average period of gestation is 28 days. The kittens (baby rabbits) are born with a very fine coat of hair and are blind. After about 4 days their eyes begin to open. The kittens begin to take short trips out of the nest by 12 to 16 days. Young rabbits mature quickly and are self-sufficient after only 4 or 5 weeks. They are sexually mature after only 2 or 3 months, so populations are able to grow with staggering speed.

MORE COOL FACTS:

Eastern Cottontail Rabbits are nocturnal. They are most active in the early morning hours and at dusk.

