

# Desert Cottontail

**Scientific Name:** *Sylvilagus audubonii*

**AKA:** Br'er Rabbit, Peter Rabbit and Bugs Bunny.

**Class:** Mammalia

**Order:** Lagomorpha

**Family:** Leporidae

**Range:** Found throughout the plains states from Eastern Montana south to West Texas, west to Central Nevada and Southern California south to Baja California and Northern Mexico



***Cottontails have been known to swim or climb trees when pursued by predators.***

## Physical Description



Desert cottontails are herbivorous. The desert cottontail lives about 2 years and is light colored, tan to gray, with a yellowish tinge. The underside of the body is whitish. The tail looks like a cotton ball and functions as an alarm signal. Raising its tail exposes a large white patch of fur, which serves as a warning signal to other cottontails. The desert cottontails range from 13 to 17 inches long. Their ears, 3 to 4 inches and their hind feet, 3 inches long. Average weight is 2 to 3 pounds. Females are larger than males.

## Habitat & Diet

The desert cottontail is the most common rabbit of California's valleys and deserts. They populate a variety of habitats, including dry desert-like grasslands and scrublands, riparian areas and pinyon-juniper forests. They thrive in urban or rural environments.

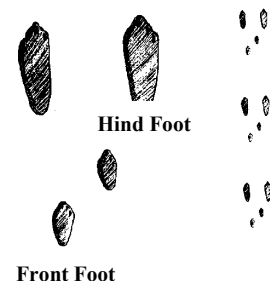
Good habitat for cottontails contains small, scattered patches of dense shrub for foraging. Cottontails use rock piles, fallen trees and logs, fencerows, thickets and patches of shrubs and brush as cover. Willow, blackberry and wild grape are favorite places to hide. Cottontails get most of their water from either the plants they eat or dew that forms on the plants. They eat grasses, but will browse on cactus, leaves, twigs, fruit, acorns, tender bark and a variety of vegetables.

A male's home range may be up to 15 acres while a female's home range can be less than 1 acre. Desert cottontails rarely stray far from their birthplace. They are nocturnal, but can be found foraging at dusk and dawn.

***Cottontails Eat Their Own Feces:*** Cottontails are coprophagic, meaning they eat their own feces for its nutritive value.

## Natural History

Cottontail rabbits originated in the United States, with a variety of species found across North and South America. The desert cottontail is common in Southern California. Early Native Americans hunted or trapped cottontails for meat, sewed the furs into blankets and used individual hides to make pouches.



## Run Rabbit Run

Despite their good eyesight, hearing, and quick movements, cottontails are heavily preyed upon by desert carnivores. Rattlesnakes may prey on the young. Golden eagles, bald eagles, great horned owls, hawks, badgers, coyotes, foxes, bobcats and humans all feast on cottontails. When threatened, a cottontail can run up to 20 miles per hour in a zigzag pattern to escape predators. Often, the cottontail runs to a protective location like a burrow or thicket.

The cottontail is an important game species as approximately 15,000 California hunting licenses are issued each year. On average, 100,000 rabbits are reported killed each year by California hunters, though this is an extremely conservative estimate as most hunters do not report their take. A large number of cottontails (especially young rabbits) are killed on roadways each year.

While rabbits don't pose a threat to other animals, they can often wreak havoc on landscaping and crops. Rabbit damage rarely reaches economic significance in commercial fields or plantations, but there are exceptions. The appetite of a rabbit can cause problems every season of the year. Rabbits eat flowers and vegetables in spring and summer. In fall and winter, they damage and kill valuable woody plants. Rabbits will devour a wide variety of flowers.

## The Rabbit in Popular Culture



The rabbit as trickster appears in American popular culture: for example Br'er Rabbit, Peter Rabbit and Bugs Bunny.

Rabbits have appeared in works in film, television and literature. Most notably the White Rabbit and the March Hare in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; in the popular novels *Watership Down*, by Richard Adams (which has also been made into a movie) and *Rabbit Hill* by Robert Lawson, as well as in Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit*.

**Peter Cottontail** is a fictional rabbit in the works of Thornton Burgess.

**Peter Rabbit, Benjamin Bunny, the Flopsy Bunnies, the Fierce Bad Rabbit and Cecily Parsley**, in the stories of Beatrix Potter.

**Rabbit**, in A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* stories.

**The Were-Rabbit**, in Wallace & Gromit: *The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* (film).

**Mr. Bunny Rabbit** from *Captain Kangaroo* (television).

## REFERENCES

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