

Species Fact Sheet: Rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*)



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Quick Facts

Recognition: Long ears without black tips, long hind legs; sandy, less reddish than brown hare and smaller, with a bobbing gait, rather than the loping gait that hares have.

Size: Up to 40cm.

Weight: 1.2-2kg. Males usually heavier than females.

Life Span: Rabbits don't often live for more than 3 years. Over 90% die in the first year of life, and most of these in the first three months.



Distribution & Habitat

Rabbits originate from the western Mediterranean. They were introduced to Britain by the Normans in the 12th century to provide meat and fur. Rabbits are now widespread throughout Britain and Ireland, but are absent from Rum, Isles of Scilly and a few smaller islands. Rabbits can be found almost anywhere they can burrow; sand dunes, railway verges and even in urban areas. The most suitable areas are those where the burrow area and food supply are side-by-side, such as woodland edge and hedgerows. Open warrens are maintained where good burrowing conditions exist on areas of short grass, sand dunes, railway verges and even in urban areas. They are rarely found above the tree-line and avoid damp conditions and areas deep in conifer woodland.

General Ecology

Behaviour

The random network of tunnels, dens and bolt holes is known as a warren. Tunneling is undertaken predominantly by the female. The depth of the burrows depends on the nature of the soil and the height of the water table. Large warrens usually imply a high population of rabbits. Rabbits are normally nocturnal but will come out in daylight if undisturbed, especially during the long days of summer.

Social groups vary from a single pair to up to 30 rabbits using the same warren. Within large groups there is a distinct social hierarchy. Origins of status are not known. The most dominant males, known as bucks, have priority of access to females, known as does. The most dominant does have access to the best nest sites. Bucks and does seldom fight with each other. Competition between does for nest sites can lead to serious injuries and death. In groups with more than one female and more than one male, rabbits are not monogamous. Lower ranking rabbits may be forced to breed in single entrance breeding "stops" away from the main burrows where they and their young are more vulnerable to predators.

Diet and Feeding

Rabbits eat a wide range of plants including grasses, cereal crops, root vegetables and young shoots of meadow plants. They will eat tree bark especially when snow covers other food sources.

Reproduction

The breeding season is mainly from January to August, producing one litter of 3-7 young per month. The doe constructs a nest inside a burrow from grass bedding and lines it with soft fur from her chest and belly. The young kittens are born blind, deaf and almost hairless. Their eyes open at 10 days, they begin to appear at the burrow entrance at 18 days and are weaned at 21-25 days. Bucks are able to mate at 4 months, does at 3.5 months. Young rabbits are preyed on by badgers, buzzards and weasels. Rabbits of all ages are taken by foxes, cats, stoats and polecats.

Conservation Status

Rabbits have no legal protection in Britain, indeed landowners control their numbers to prevent them damaging neighbours' land. In the middle of the 19th century rabbit numbers increased dramatically, becoming major agricultural pests. Their increase was due to the large scale planting of hedgerows, providing shelter and burrows in the loosened soil. New agricultural technology increased cereal production, increasing their food supply; and large numbers of the rabbits' natural predators were killed by gamekeepers on new shooting estates.

By 1950 rabbits destroyed approximately £50 million worth of crops per year, but the virus myxomatosis appeared, and within 2 years 99% of the population had died. Rabbits are developing resistance, though outbreaks still occur, but the population has largely recovered and rabbit damage is estimated at over £100 million/year.