

THE SNOWSHOER

BY MARGO GUIGNION

The snow-shoe hare, one of our most common mammals, is often mistakenly referred to as a rabbit. This particular hare has very large snowshoe-shaped feet, covered with dense hair. This enables it to run lightly on heavy snow, hence the name "snowshoe hare".

Hares are somewhat different from rabbits, as hares are born with eyes open, a hairy body and are able to run about only hours after birth. Rabbits have none of these characteristics.

Snowshoe hares are active all year round, and since they have little defence, they must depend on camouflage for protection. During spring, the white coat falls out and is replaced by brown hair, while in late fall the opposite exchange takes place. All this occurs in an effort to avoid such predators as hawks, owls and the crafty fox. Some hares, because of genetic mutations or changes, remain black all year round, and thus are in great danger while foraging in the white winterland.

Hares are most active between dusk and dawn when they do most of their feeding. They spend the daylight hours resting for later activity.

During winter, tracks may be found everywhere in the snow and some areas are utilized so heavily that deep paths called "runs" are formed between trees. These same areas are unbelievably void of hare during the day. Tracks may deceive the untrained eye as to path direction as the hind feet jump slightly beyond the front in a normal gait.

Hares survive winter on foods like twigs and the bark of such trees as cherry, willow and aspen. One may often find signs of winter feeding by looking for diagonally cut edges of tender young branches, or the absence of bark on older growth. At times, these signs may be discovered high above a hare's reach. This is an indication of snow depth during the past winter. The deeper

the snow, the greater access the hare has to young branches. Such a diet of woody material may suggest the content and fibre of pellets, or droppings. If a pellet was closely examined and broken apart, its "sawdust" consistency would be obvious. As you may well understand, only a small amount of nutrition may be available from twigs unless an extremely efficient digestive system is involved. In the case of hares, they may eat their own pellets and gain more nutrition from them, since introduced bacteria in the pellet enables further breakdown of the original food material the second time around.

As you can imagine, this diet of twigs may seem pretty dry; therefore hares are anxious to get their first taste of new spring growth. For this reason, one may often see hares during early spring along roadsides feeding on young plants. Roadsides are usually free of snow before woodlands, making it possible for early availability of young grassy shoots.

Hares are known for their ability to reproduce rapidly. This is the species' way of surviving heavy predation. Each summer, females may have two or three litters of three or four young, which are born in a grass depression in the ground.

Young bunnies are nursed for a few days in the nest. Nursing may continue on occasion even after the young bunnies are weaned.

Hares are interesting little mammals and can provide many hours of entertainment through observation in the field.

