

Conservation Corner

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Winter is upon us. While much of Iowa's wildlife and plant life survive the winter by hibernating, migrating, or becoming dormant, some brave souls stick it out and stay active all through the cold and snow. One of them, the white-tailed jackrabbit, will be our first mammal friend of 2017.

North America is home to 15 species of rabbits and hares in the Family Leporidae, but only the eastern cottontail and white-tailed jackrabbit live in Iowa. White-tailed jackrabbits are actually hares, not rabbits, more closely related to snowshoe hares than to cottontail rabbits. The two are easy to tell apart. White-tailed jackrabbits are much larger, weighing 6-10 pounds vs. 2-4 pounds for cottontails. They also have different reproductive biology. Jackrabbit young are precocial, born with fur and open eyes, while cottontails are born naked and blind. My zoology professor at BVU, Dr. Richard Lampe, shared his experience of driving the tractor as a young boy with a jackrabbit kit in his sweatshirt keeping him company for the day.

White-tailed jackrabbits, well adapted for our treeless prairies, were plentiful and valued for their fur and meat at the time of settlement. Jackrabbits were common into the 1960s, making good livings in the oats, hayfields, and set-aside acres. Since then, however, numbers have steadily declined. White-tailed jackrabbits are now considered a species of concern in Iowa, and the IDNR closed the jackrabbit hunting season in 2011.

Jackrabbits are herbivores, generally feeding at dawn and dusk, and spend the day hiding in shallow ground depressions. Like many prey species, jackrabbits have high birth rates, 3-6 kits per litter and 3-4 litters per season, along with high mortality rates of 70-90%.

Jackrabbits can quickly cover long distances, bounding like kangaroos with leaps of 20 feet and speeds up to 40 mph, stats our family can affirm. Our jackrabbit story involved dad speeding up to show the kids a jackrabbit running alongside the gravel road only to have the prey suddenly stop and leap high to avoid its predator, shattering our pickup's windshield and covering us with pelleted glass before crash landing in the pickup bed.

Jackrabbits are known for their long ears, which may range up to 6 inches in length and which rotate independently of each other. Like their northern cousins, Iowa jackrabbits also have two color phases, a brownish-gray coat for summer and a white coat with black ear tips for winter. Hares are also

known for their large hind feet which allow them to quickly flee from predators in winter and were likely the inspiration for the first snowshoes worn by man.

If you'd like to try snowshoeing, ISU Extension and Conservation invites everyone to a Family Fun Day in Rolfe on Sunday, Feb. 19, from 2:00 – 4:00 p.m. Join us for indoor activities and snacks at the RAM Center and cross-country skiing and snowshoeing at the Three Rivers Trailhead Park. There's no registration charge, just enjoyable winter fun. Who knows, maybe we'll spot a white-tailed jackrabbit along the trail.

