



Tips
from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

I have a special place for rabbits in my heart. When I was a kid, rabbit hunting was one of the activities I was allowed to take part in without adult supervision. That is a big thing for a young boy growing up in the mountains, especially one who usually required a great deal of supervision.

Occasionally, I was lucky enough to bring home a rabbit, and my grandmother would cook it up for us. She had a recipe using mustard sauce that I have never been able to duplicate. It has been many years since I ate her baked rabbit.

Admittedly, my interaction with rabbits the last 40 years has become more informal. They now populate my yard, giving my dogs something to bark at. I never let those Jack Russell's chase the poor creatures because the dogs have an unfair speed advantage. The rabbits eat everything my wife and I try and grow, treating our garden like a grocery store.

Colorado is home to eight different species of rabbits. These include the American Pika, Snowshoe Hare, Black-tailed Jackrabbit, White-tailed Jackrabbit, Desert Cottontail, Mountain Cottontail, Eastern Cottontail and the Pygmy Rabbit. The cottontails are the ones we see most often around town, in folk's yards, and my garden.

The most popular species, the eastern cottontail grows to about 20 inches in length at maturity and weigh in at a maximum of four pounds. In the wild, these cottontails seldom live more than two years. One species of rabbits, Flemish giant rabbit, (not wild to Colorado) can reach two-and-a-half feet in length and weigh in at 25 pounds. My Jack Russell would have fun trying to tackle one of those brutes.

Rabbits thrive in highly vegetated areas that have lots of grass and plants to feed on and take cover in. They don't require a very large area to shelter in. I have a few that live under the deck to my small barn. A rabbit will live out its entire life within a ten acre area of land, rarely venturing further unless food or shelter is lacking.

Cottontails are herbivores that like green plants like grass, clover, cabbage, flowers, vegetables and fruits, and especially anything we plant



This cottontail is one of the rabbits that calls my garden home. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/ Mark Rackay)

in our garden. Growing up watching Bugs Bunny, I believed rabbits only eat carrots, but such is not the case. Wild rabbits do not eat root vegetables at all. Carrots seem to be the only thing in the garden that is safe from them. (Jack Russell's love carrots.)

Rabbit's teeth include both upper and lower incisors, which are both very sharp and strong. These incisors grow as much as five inches a year, and never stop growing.

In the wild, rabbits reach maturity at three months of age, and generally start reproducing at four months. The term "breed like rabbits" has a great deal of truth to it.

A female rabbit, called a doe, can be continuously pregnant for up to eight months, as each gestation period lasts 31 days. The doe can produce between four and eight litters per year, with each litter having an average of six babies, called kits, in each. That can be close to 50 babies a year and I think they are all in my garden.

A doe is capable of becoming pregnant within a few hours of giving birth. Before you think the world is about to be overcome with rabbits, about 50 percent of their population falls victim to predators within the first year.

Try and sneak up on a

rabbit sometime. It is nearly impossible and there are several reasons for that. One is their vision covers nearly 360 degrees. They can actually see behind themselves and the sides without having to turn their heads. Rabbits have a small blind spot directly in front of their faces.

Another thing you will notice about rabbits is their large ears. Their ears can rotate 270 degrees, allowing them to detect any threat approaching from up to a couple miles away. The other reason for those large ears is to help keep them cool on hot days, as body heat escapes from the large surface area.

If you happen to get close to one, his powerful legs will give him a quick jump away from you. Cottontails run in a zigzag pattern when running across an open area, making them a difficult target for a predator. Add to that a top speed of 18 mph, and they can be tough to catch.

Rabbits can sleep with their eyes open (a skill I tried to master during my school years). This trait protects them from predators because they appear awake and not vulnerable. Sleeping with their eyes open also allows them to detect the presence of danger even when they are resting.

All is not fun and games

having rabbits around. If allowed to run wild and uncontrolled, rabbits can destroy lawns and gardens. There were reports back in 2013 of rabbits chewing through ignition cables on cars parked at Denver International Airport. To deter the critters, mechanics began coating wires with coyote urine as a deterrent to the rabbits.

If you want to keep rabbits from ransacking the landscape, try watering the lawns more. Frequent watering helps flush out the rabbit urine. Also, try to make your property less appealing to them. Keep brush and bushes trimmed back, thereby eliminating areas that are easy for rabbits to hide in.

Another thing to be aware of is the potential for disease carried by rabbits. Tularemia, or rabbit fever, is an infectious disease of humans and animals caused by the bacterium *Francisella tularensis*. Rabbits, hares and other rodents are especially susceptible to the disease and often die in large numbers during an outbreak.

Humans are most often infected through a bite from a tick or a deer fly that had contact with the infected rodent. You can also contract the disease from handling infected animal tissue. Hunters should be especially careful when in contact with infected rabbits.

Inhaling dust infected with

the bacterium can also infect people. This can occur during farming or gardening when using machinery. A tractor or mower can run over an infected animal or carcass. This is rare but does result in the most severe form of the disease, called pneumonic tularemia. Early diagnosis and antibiotics are crucial to cure this potentially life-threatening disease.

I never ran into an infected rabbit during my rabbit hunting youth. My grandfather would not let me hunt them until after we had a couple hard freezes, claiming the sick ones died off, and there is probably some truth to that.

I try and keep my relationship with the cottontails on a social basis these days. I realize they eat our garden to nubbins, leaving very little for us. In response, I just plant extra and let the rabbits have their day. Besides, they keep my dogs entertained for hours, which in turn entertains me.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a Director for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org



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I saw a news article this week about...

...a resident of Waveland, Mississippi who was walking along the water's edge on the beach one morning and spotted a 9-10 foot alligator. Actually, it was the fourth one spotted that morning on this gentleman's walk. His post included a picture of the gator, complete with snout and reptilian eyes, just peeking out of the water in complete stealth mode. Now you know why I go into any body of water only up to my ankles! And trust me, I DO possess the power to levitate right out of there if I need to!

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