

Long live the jackrabbit



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

My adopted dad owned a fair-sized ranch west of Laramie, Wyoming, and I got to spend a few years there with him.

Hunting and fishing were a way of life for us and we took any chance we had. I ran my first set of traps on this ranch, bringing home beaver and muskrats to sell.

One particular critter that was thick on this ranch was the jackrabbit. Jackrabbits were pretty much everywhere and grew to an enormous size.

Our cattle dogs used to chase them whenever they got too close to the house but were never successful in catching one. Probably a good thing because I don't think one of those dogs could have gone 10 rounds with a Wyoming jackrabbit.

Prior to my arrival, the only rabbits I had ever seen were the fuzzy little cottontail variety. The first jackrabbit I encountered scared five years off my 10-year-old little body. The bloody thing was bigger than me. I could have ridden the thing if I could catch it. I ran all the way back to the house, half-amazed and half-terrified. I figured if rabbits were this big on the ranch, I couldn't wait to see the trout.

For starters, there is the



A white-tailed jackrabbit strutting his stuff, showing off those powerful legs. (Courtesy photo/ Colorado Parks and Wildlife)

white-tailed jackrabbit who lives in the mountain parks, sagebrush prairies, and sometimes all the way down in the native prairies. His cousin, the black-tailed jackrabbit lives in the desert country in southern and Southwestern Colorado, and occasionally on the Eastern Plains. The black-tail is the one we are most likely to encounter around here.

You can find him in the phone book under his Latin name *Lepus californicus*, but on the street he is the black-tailed jackrabbit. You will recognize him because of his unusually large ears, way oversized for the rest of him. He also has long and very slender front legs, but it is the back legs you will notice.

The legs on a jackrabbit have very large feet, almost 5 inches long. They seem to make his ears not stand

out so much. Those long legs can reach speeds of close to 40 mph when they need to escape from something.

Because of the size of the ears, legs and feet, you would guess this animal to be the size of a large dog at first glance, but they are much smaller. The adult black-tail jackrabbit will reach 2 feet in length and tip the scales close to 8 pounds.

The white-tailed jackrabbit is a bit larger than the black-tail. We always call these guys "rabbits" but they are really in the family *Leporidae*, which includes rabbits and hares. There are five species of jackrabbit hares in North America, but only three call Colorado home.

The third hare to call Colorado home is the snowshoe hare. The snowshoe has much smaller ears

but still has the long legs and oversize feet as factory equipment. The snowshoe only weighs out as about half as much as the jackrabbits and are usually a foot long. A fun fact is the snowshoe hare and the black-tailed jackrabbit turn white in the winter months to help them avoid predators.

True rabbits, like the cottontail live in brushy country, rather than the more open prairie country of their hare cousins. The most important distinction between them is that cottontails are born blind, completely hairless, and helpless. Hares, by contrast, are born with full sight, fully furred, and legs ready to run.

Jackrabbits are solitary animals except during the mating season which takes place from February to July. The phrase, "as mad as

a March hare" refers to the unusual boxing behavior of jackrabbits that is typically seen during the spring. Females use their paws to hit the males when they want to avoid copulation. Kind of makes you wonder how they produce so many litters with behavior like that, but one of nature's mysteries, I guess.

A normal litter of young produces around five babies, called leverets. The snowshoe will have two litters a year while the jackrabbit can have four litters a year. Now we know where the term, "breeds like a jackrabbit," comes from. The normal lifespan of a jackrabbit can reach five years in the wild.

Jackrabbits are nocturnal, meaning they move around mostly at night. They bed up during the daylight hours, usually to avoid predators, in shallow

depressions in the ground known as forms. Those predators include coyotes, foxes, wolves, bobcats, and large birds of prey. The main predator of the snowshoe hare is the lynx.

When alarmed, a jackrabbit can leap 10 feet or more and can jump and run in a zig-zag pattern to confuse the predator that is on their fantail. Jackrabbits thump the ground with their hind legs to alarm other animals about a potential danger.

Jackrabbits were once hunted commercially for their fur and often for meat. They are doing well as a species, but anything not listed as endangered or threatened is rare these days, and these guys are on neither list. The state of Colorado classifies them as small game and lists a hunting season that starts Oct. 1, and runs to the end of February, but always check with Colorado Parks and Wildlife for any recent changes.

I enjoyed my years in Wyoming with my adopted dad, the ranch, fishing, and all the wild game. I will never forget that first encounter with a rabbit that was nearly as big as I was.

Long live the jackrabbit!

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for several saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a director and public information officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

CPW's Take a Friend Fishing contest opens

SPECIAL TO THE MDP

Colorado Parks and Wildlife is encouraging experienced anglers to mentor beginners and enter its annual Take a Friend Fishing contest for their chance at premium gear.

Montrose residents Jim Welch and Ryan Zuidema were among winners named for the fishing contest in 2022. The other winners were Darren Orr and Debra Mastic of Longmont, and Sadie Swieca and Joe Kubis of Leadville.

The competition entails an experienced angler teaching a beginner or beginners to fish, then the mentor and mentees submit a photograph and brief

story about their time on the water. Submissions are judged based on "their ability to inspire," CPW says.

"Fishing is something a person can enjoy their entire life. When you teach someone how to fish, you can literally change their life forever," said CPW Angler Outreach Coordinator Andre Egli in a news release.

"We've received some truly inspiring stories about fishing in Colorado over the past few years. Co-workers who became great friends, family members who reconnected, veterans who bonded over shared experiences, amazing moments that were made pos-

sible by Colorado's bountiful fishing opportunities. I'm excited to see what kind of photos and stories our anglers will send in this year."

Winners will be selected in July, October and next February; both mentors and the people they mentor will receive a prize, ranging in retail value from \$300 to \$900.

Prizes include:

- Cooler package: Soft sided YETI cooler and 60-quart polar cap cooler from Bass Pro Shops & Cabela's — \$600
- Full beginner fly fishing set up (rod/reel combo, tippet, leaders, tools, and fly box with 60 files) from Ascent Fly Fishing — \$400
- Full beginner spin-casting set up (rod/reel combo, net, and tackle box with over \$300 worth of gear and lures) — \$400
- Full ice fishing setups including: sled, auger, rods/reels, and pop up shelter — \$600
- Premium fly fishing set up: Orvis rods with Ross Reels — \$900
- Tenkara rods from Zen Tenkara — \$300
- Belly boat with accessories (fins & pump) — \$300
- Each winner will also receive a year subscription to Colorado Outdoors Magazine.

How to qualify:

- Mentor and mentee must be at least 21

- Mentees must meet one of these criteria:
- Never had a fishing license until 2023
- Only had a fishing license in 2022 (e.g., a second-year angler)
- Not had a fishing license in the past five consecutive years (i.e., since 2018)
- Contest participants must follow all applicable Colorado fishing regulations.
- Mentor must have had a Colorado fishing license before the start of the contest.

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