

NATURE DETECTIVES

Winter 2009

Snowshoe Hares – Winter Rabbits



Snowshoe Hare
in Winter

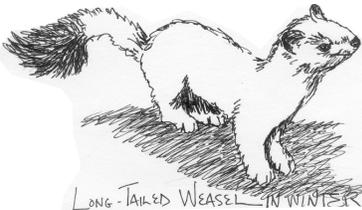
Okay, it is completely silly to say snowshoe hares are winter rabbits. First of all, they live in Boulder County all year, not just in winter. Second, they aren't even rabbits. They are true hares, which means they are rabbit cousins.

They do look very much like rabbits, but their big feet are the first indication that they are not rabbits but hares instead. The big feet are also one of the ways their bodies are adapted for winter. Big furry feet act like snowshoes giving these hares their common name and allowing them to hop on top of the snow to find food and flee from predators.

Winter Coats for Snowy Weather

In summer, the snowshoe hares wear coats that match the colors of rocks and twigs. Their fur is rusty to grayish brown except for their gray-white bellies and chins. They often have gray-white furred legs in summer months.

Shorter hours of daylight in September trigger the change from summer to winter coats for snowshoe hares. The gray underfur stays, but the summer top hair falls out. Thick, fluffy, insulating white fur grows in its place. The change is gradual and may be helped along by cold and snowy weather. The change doesn't always match conditions; and some years, white hares find themselves dangerously easy to spot on dry ground. But, usually, the gradual change matches the increasing snow conditions so by December white hares hop around on snow-covered terrain.



LONG-TAILED WEASEL IN WINTER

Snowshoe hares aren't the only Colorado animals to sport snow-colored coats during winter. Weasel fur and ptarmigan feathers also change gradually in fall from their summer brownish colors to winter white.



Ptarmigan in winter

Do you do anything special to get ready for snow and cold weather?

Surviving Winter

Snowshoe hares thrive in the sub-alpine zone where wintery conditions may persist much of the year. The hares are well suited for survival here. Even the bottoms of their feet are very furry for warmth. Their back feet have large spreadable toes and bristly hairs to create the snowshoe effect and to help them balance as they reach up high to nibble twigs and bark. Their bodies are adapted for the little bit of food supply that is available during the cold season. Eating, resting and hiding, they survive harsh conditions that many other mammals avoid. Adults can live up to five years, though most snowshoe hares don't survive that long.

Snowshoe Hare Menu

In winter, their meager menu includes the needles, buds and bark of conifer trees, willow twigs, and the bark of aspen and alder trees. They will gnaw the meat of dead animals, too. Warm weather brings variety to the menu with the addition of new buds, leaves, willow shoots, grasses and other plants. They eat snow or lap dew for moisture.

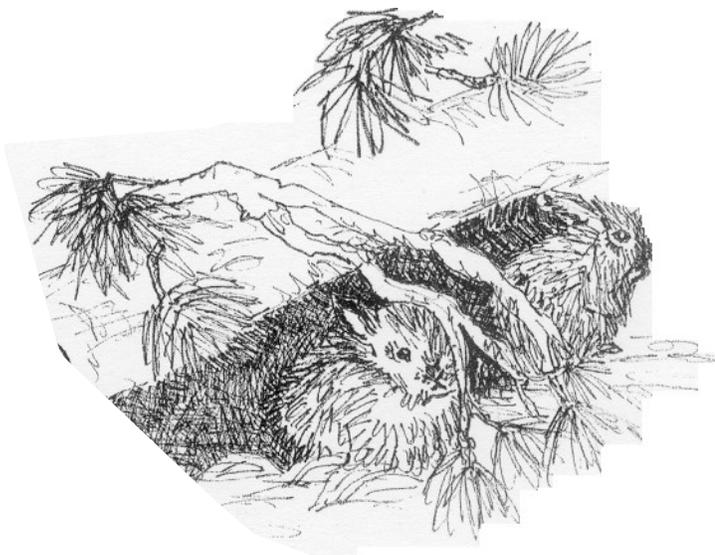
Like others in the rabbit and hare family, they have two kinds of poop. The first poop is gel-like and they eat it because it has lots of nutrients. The second poop is firmer and they don't eat that poop.



Hares Born Ready to Hop

Snowshoe hares are not the only hares in Boulder County. Black-tailed jackrabbits and white-tailed jackrabbits live here, and they are hares, too. Blame their confusing names on the early explorers because they called them rabbits. Both kinds of jackrabbits are bigger than snowshoe hares. White-tailed jacks turn white in winter like the snowshoes. You can tell the smaller snowshoes from the white-tailed jacks because the snowshoe hares have shorter ears and bigger feet.

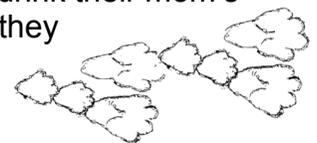
We also have cottontail rabbits in our area. Cottontails really are rabbits. What makes a hare not a rabbit? Rabbits will dig and live in burrows. Hares never burrow. They only make shallow scrapes on the ground or snow for their beds. The biggest difference between hares and rabbits is their babies.



Baby rabbits are born completely helpless, with closed eyes and with no fur.

Baby hares are born with fur on their bodies. Their eyes are open and they are alert from birth. They hop around within hours of being born.

Within days, the new little hares spread out to separate hiding places. They only come together with their littermates for a few minutes each night to drink their mom's milk. Within a month, they are weaned and on their own.



Hare Raising

Baby snowshoe hares are born with keen hearing and sensitive noses to detect danger. If they are alarmed they simply “freeze” in place and hope a predator won’t see them. The adult snowshoes can avoid danger with hopping gallops up to 27 miles per hour. They zigzag or even hop straight up in the air to confuse a pursuer. They can jump 10 feet in a single bound. Most of the time they try to stay hidden in vegetation to avoid danger.

The snowshoes venture out of their hiding places in dim light or dark. They are active at dawn and dusk, during the night and sometimes on cloudy days. They tend to travel on the same trampled down paths through shrubbery. If they need to swim to escape danger, they can but they don’t seem to like swimming. They do like cleaning and combing their fur and taking dust baths in warm weather.

Despite all precautions, clever predators take many young hares. American martens, weasels, foxes, bobcats and coyotes find snowshoe hares tasty. Golden eagles, great-horned owls and large hawks eat their share. In winter, lynx can chase the snowshoe hares on top of deep snow because lynx have big snowshoe feet, too.



Hare-y Situations

When snowshoe hares sense danger, they often stomp their hind feet.

Perhaps this thumping is to warn other hares nearby. When hares are caught they may emit a loud squeal.

Hares that are sparring over territory or a mate will also stomp their back feet. They might flatten their ears, lunge at each other and leap. They might chase after each other at high speed and end up tumbling around or boxing each other. They might hiss and snort and growl their displeasure.



Looking for Signs of Snowshoe Hares

Look for shallow depressions in the snow where they rest under willow thickets or under shrubs in high forests. Look for their well-worn trails through the underbrush or in thickets of young conifers from 8,000 to 11,500 feet in elevation.

Look for ball-shaped, slightly flattened scat. (3/8 to 1/2 inch in diameter)



Tracking Hares

Look for tracks. Remember a hopping rabbit has tracks that show the back paw prints in front. Sometimes if they walk on top of firm snow, snowshoe rabbits don't leave any tracks, especially hind foot tracks.

Look for twigs that have been sharply cut off at an angle and bark that is gnawed off a tree up to the height a hare might reach standing on its back legs.

Guess who?

Can you guess the tiniest rabbit relative in Colorado? _____ !

Hopping Characters

Name some of your favorite stories that have rabbit or hare characters.

Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter might be one.



Snowshoe Hare
tracks in snow
about 1/3 life size

The answer to Guess Who? Pika!

