

# Desert Cottontail

**SCIENTIFIC NAME:** *Sylvilagus audubonii*. From the Latin *sylva* meaning “woodland” and *lagos* meaning “hare.” The word *audubonii* refers to John James Audubon, an early American naturalist, hunter and wildlife artist.

**DESCRIPTION:** One of three cottontail species found in Arizona, this is the most abundant and widespread. Back fur typically is reddish to brownish to grayish, usually tipped with black. The belly is white. The top of the tail is black, but the underside is white; hence the name “cottontail.” Cottontails with paler back fur tend to live in drier climates. Compared to

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its distant cousins the jackrabbits, the desert cottontail has shorter legs and smaller feet. Its hind feet are significantly larger than its front feet. It has extremely large ears, which helps to distinguish it from eastern and mountain cottontail species.

**DISTRIBUTION:** Desert cottontails are the most numerous and widespread cottontail in the western United States and central Mexico. They are found from northern Montana south to the State of Puebla in Mexico, and from the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas west to California.

This rabbit is documented in every county in Arizona.

**HABITAT:** The desert cottontail lives in a wide variety of habitat types and elevations, but occupies more arid areas than other cottontails. In Arizona, this rabbit is probably most abundant in thick desert scrub, chaparral or pinyon-juniper stands associated with rocky cover. However, desert cottontails are common in nearly all habitats in Arizona, except in mixed-conifer forests and other habitat types above 7,500 feet in elevation. At these higher elevations, it is replaced by the smaller mountain cottontail (*Sylvilagus nuttallii*). The desert cottontail completely overlaps the range of the eastern cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) in Arizona.

**BIOLOGY:** Desert cottontails are extremely prolific, breeding from January to September or, in warmer localities in Arizona, year-round. They build a shallow excavated “nest” in the ground, lined with grasses and their own fur. Two or three young are born after a 28-day gestation period. Females average five litters per year, and juvenile females reach sexual maturity 80 days following birth.

Desert cottontails feed on grasses, forbs, shrubs and even acorns. Though they

can receive their moisture needs from the foods they consume, cottontails will drink free water when they find it.

Adapted to harsh desert environments, this rabbit’s physiology minimizes overheating and water loss. Large ears dissipate heat when temperatures are extreme, and a higher-than-normal lethal body temperature allows it to survive in some of the hottest locations in North America.

The abundance and density of desert cottontails can fluctuate dramatically in response to precipitation and habitat condition. Documented densities of desert cottontails range from 0.6 per acre in “bad” years to more than six rabbits per acre in favorable conditions.

Precipitation, and corresponding habitat conditions, regulate desert cottontail abundance. The list of predators that feed on cottontails is long; from snakes, hawks, owls and eagles to foxes, coyotes, bobcats, mountain lions, black bears and humans. Predation does not regulate cottontail populations; rather, predators (other than humans) are more greatly influenced by the number of rabbits.

**STATUS:** The desert cottontail is a popular small game animal, particularly with young hunters. In Arizona, hunters harvest around 80,000 cottontails (all species combined) a year.

**MANAGEMENT NEEDS:** There are no special management needs for this abundant and adaptable rabbit, so long as habitats receive protection from development. 🐾

■ Formerly the small game biologist for the Arizona Game and Fish Department and a frequent contributor to this magazine, Mark Zornes has returned to Wyoming.

