

8/12/77

Natural History Notes



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THE SNOWSHOE HARE

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Snowshoe Hare's "snowshoe." Spread toes of the right hind foot.

This hare is named for its large hairy "snowshoe" feet which are a specialized adaptation for this common inhabitant of our northern swamps and bogs. The feet help keep the hare on top of the soft deep snow and prevent slipping in icy patches, thus helping the animal escape predators. When eluding a predator the snowshoe attains speeds up to 30 miles per hour and is able to jump 12 feet in a single leap. To further escape the pursuer, the snowshoe can turn and change course in the midst of a jump and that way can also get a better look at its predator.

The snowshoe also has another specialized feature. Its color changes from brown in the summer to white in the winter. This adaptation, called cryptic coloration, helps it to stay out of sight during both the summer and winter months. Though this color change parallels the onset of warm or cold weather, the temperature does not initiate the change. Biologists have found that this color change is related to the decrease and increase of light as the days shorten in the fall and lengthen in the spring. A snowshoe hare kept in warm surroundings will turn white in the fall just as it would in the wild.

The snowshoe lives in swamps and favors cedar, spruce and hemlock which supply abundant food and cover. Key predators include the weasel, mink, fisher, bobcat, coyote, fox, hawks, owls and even housecats when civilization encroaches. Being mainly a vegetarian, the snowshoe feeds on grasses and weeds in the summer and twigs and tree bark in the winter.

The breeding seasons begins in mid-March and up to seven young are born 36 days after mating. Each female may produce several litters each season. During this time the female defends its territory. The young, called "leverets," weigh about three ounces at birth and are nursed for about one month. The adults reach a weight of about four pounds. Their life span rarely exceeds three years, in

the wild. Approximately 70% of the adults die each year.

The snowshoe hare is a classic example of cyclic populations. Swamps overcrowded with snowshoes this year may have almost no inhabitants next year. Peak populations generally occur every seven to ten years and vary from one area to another. Distinct reasons for these great population fluctuations remain unclear. Some factors causing these cycles probably include overbrowsing, reduced size of mating territories, disease and an increase in the number of predators following peak populations. Parasites such as the rabbit tick and diseases like coccidiosis are common in overcrowded conditions.

The snowshoe hare is not a rabbit. Hares are usually larger than rabbits, have longer ears and hind legs. Hares are born furred, with their eyes open and sensitive to sound. Rabbits are born blind, hairless and helpless.

The fur of the snowshoe is of little value but is often sold as Baltic Fox or White Fox. The meat is very good up to early winter. As the diet changes to bark and cedar twigs the meat takes on a "woody" taste. Snowshoe hunting is a challenging sport and a great way to enjoy the outdoors.

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