



Controlling Cottontail and Jackrabbit Damage

Cottontails and jackrabbits are common throughout most parts of Texas. There are several species of cottontail rabbits in Texas, but only one species of jackrabbit, the black-tailed. Jackrabbits are true hares and differ in many ways from cottontails, which are classed as rabbits. Because of their food preferences, the presence of cottontails and jackrabbits frequently conflicts with agricultural or forestry interests. They also can damage gardens, ornamental trees, shrubs, fruits, vegetables and lawns.

Black-tailed jackrabbits (*Lepus californicus*) usually are found in open or semi-open rangelands, pasturelands or desert areas. They also inhabit areas that have been overgrazed by livestock. Jackrabbits are most active in the early morning or late evening hours and at night. During the hot part of the day they lie under shrubs or clumps of tall grass where the shade protects them. Jackrabbits rely on their keen eyesight, excellent hearing and speed to escape when danger threatens. Their diet consists of forage crops, cactus, mesquite, and numerous grasses and weeds. They prefer green vegetation when available, but will browse on trees and shrubs when other food is not found.

Cottontail rabbits (*Sylvilagus* spp.) inhabit brush land and marginal areas and seldom venture far from brushy cover. They are commonly found along fence rows, in brushy fields, along the edges of cultivated fields and roadsides, and along creeks and streams. They also may live in poorly drained bottom lands. These animals rest during the day in brush or other cover, or in underground burrows

dug by other animals. Cottontails are not normally sociable animals and usually disperse over a given area. Cottontails are most active at twilight and during the night, when they travel from cover to feed in open pastures, meadows, lawns, gardens and flower beds. Their diet varies with the seasons, but they prefer green vegetation. During the winter they will eat the bark and twigs from trees and shrubs if green vegetation cannot be found. They also eat mesquite beans and the juicy flesh of prickly pear cactus.

Biology and Reproduction

Jackrabbits

Adult weight: 4 to 8 pounds.

Total length: 17 to 21 inches.

Color: Grayish-brown body, large black-tipped ears, and black streak on the top of tail.

Gestation period: 41 to 47 days.

Litter size: One to six.

Number of litters: Two to six per year. Young are born year round, fully furred and become active shortly after birth. No nest is built for the young.

Life span: Approximately 8 years.



Cottontails

Adult weight: 2 to 4 pounds.

Total length: 14 to 17 inches.

Color: Reddish-brown to brown, cottony white tail.

Gestation period: 26 to 27 days.

Litter size: One to eight, average four.

Number of litters: Four to five per year. Young are born year round, hairless, blind and helpless.

Life span: Approximately 5 years.



Damage

In rural areas, large populations of jackrabbits can seriously compete with livestock for available forage. Cottontails more often are a problem in gardens and flower beds where they feed on a wide variety of vegetables and flowers, and often cause extensive damage to ornamental plants. Cottontails and jackrabbits also have been known to carry tularemia, a disease that can be transmitted to people.

Control Methods

Although it may be necessary to control cottontails and jackrabbits to reduce the damage they cause, completely eliminating them is not necessary, desirable or even possible. There are several control methods that can be used.

Cultural Control

Modifying the habitat to make it less attractive to rabbits is often an effective method of control. The removal of brush piles, weedy patches, rock or lumber piles will sometimes cause rabbits to leave in search of a more suitable habitat. This method is especially effective in suburban areas, where suitable habitat is difficult to find.

Exclusion

This can be accomplished by constructing a rabbit-proof fence. A fence of woven wire or 2-inch poultry netting, 2 1/2 to 3 feet high, can be placed around gardens, flower beds or other places where protection is needed. Because of the cost of the

fencing materials, this method usually is feasible only in small areas. The bottom of the fence should be buried in the ground at least 6 inches to prevent rabbits from digging under the fence. Individual trees can be protected by wrapping sheet metal or hardware cloth around the bases of the trees. The sheet metal or hardware cloth should encircle the trunk completely, and should be 1 to 2 inches away from the trunk to allow for the natural growth of the tree.

Trapping

Jackrabbits are not often caught in box or cage traps because they are reluctant to enter traps or dark places. However, trapping can be an effective way to remove cottontails. The traps should be placed where the rabbits are feeding or resting. Corn cobs, dried leafy alfalfa and clover are good cold-weather baits. Apples, carrots, lettuce and cabbage are good baits to use during the warmer months.

Chemical Control

Several repellents are registered for rabbit control. Repellents are usually available from garden supply centers, feed stores and hardware stores.

Restricted-use pesticides are available but can be used only by a licensed pest control operator or a person who has a private applicator's license that permits the use of such chemicals. Directions on all chemical labels should be read, understood and followed exactly.

Shooting

In rural areas, shooting is a quick, easy and effective method of control. Mornings and evenings are the best times to attempt to shoot rabbits. Check local laws and ordinances before using this as a control method.

Restrictions

Cottontails and jackrabbits are not protected in Texas and may be taken at any time. However, persons wishing to live trap the animals and then relocate them should notify local representatives of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

For additional information, contact the nearest office of the Texas Wildlife Damage Management Service.

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