



Eastern Cottontail Rabbit



It's not the Easter Bunny, it's the Easter-n Cottontail Rabbit!

This is the most common cottontail rabbit found in Ontario. It ranges from Southern Canada, most of the United States, all the way down to the tip of South America.

They have a dense coat that is greyish to reddish brown, long ears, eyes on the sides of their head, and a distinct white "cotton ball" tail. Adults usually weigh around 2.5 lbs.

Rabbits are similar to rodents, but they are in a different grouping called *lagomorphs*. One difference between these groups is that while lagomorphs eat strictly plant materials, rodents may eat other things like seeds or insects. There is also a difference between their dental formula (what types of teeth they have): lagomorphs have four top incisors (front teeth) that are white, while rodents only have two which are an orange-rusty colour.

Rabbits, among many other animals including rodents and some primates, do something we humans find...unappetizing. They eat their own poop! All animals' bodies, including ours, try to absorb as much nutrients from food as possible before excreting it. The way a rabbit's digestive system is set up causes them to lose a lot of nutrients in their poop the first time they eat it, so the only way to make sure they get as much nutrients from their food as possible is to eat it again! They will only "re-eat" their food once, this maximizes the benefits they get from each meal.

Habitat

Eastern Cottontail Rabbits hang around the fringes of open areas, such as meadows, fields, and farms. There are lots of plants to eat in open areas, but they need to be able to run and hide from predators in covered areas like thickets, rock or bush piles, and burrows.

Diet

These rabbits are crepuscular (active at dawn and dusk) and nocturnal (active during the night). During these times they look for food. They are herbivores so they eat grass, plants, clovers, goldenrod, dandelions, and if there is a garden or farm nearby, fruits and vegetables. In winter, when there are very few green plants to be found,

they feed on the woody parts of plants - bark, stems, and buds of trees like birch, oak, maple, dogwood, and staghorn sumac.

Predators

Rabbits are primary consumers - this means that they are in the part of the food chain that eats plants, but are eaten by larger animals (secondary consumers). Some animals that might prey on rabbits are foxes, coyotes, weasels, owls, and hawks. If a predator is spotted nearby, the rabbit will freeze until it leaves. However, if it's spotted, it must flee! Zigzagging and leaping from side to side, an Eastern Cottontail Rabbit can run very fast, reaching up to speeds of about 27 kilometers per hour!

Reproduction

Despite what the Easter Bunny brings you, rabbits do not lay eggs! They produce live babies, called bunnies or kittens, that are born almost hairless and with their eyes shut. Eastern Cottontail Rabbits mate between February and September, sometimes three or four times a year, producing one to nine bunnies each time! (Multiply these numbers to see how many bunnies can be born in one year from one mom!) Offspring are able to start reproducing after two or three months; that means that another generation can be born in the same year - that's a lot of rabbits!

Did you know a group of rabbits is called a **colony**, and a group of bunnies is called a **fluffle**!

Males and females perform a mating ritual where they chase and hop around each other. After mating, females make a shallow nest on the ground, and line it with soft materials like fur. Sometimes the helpless babies are hard to spot in the grass, so you have to be very careful!



Can you spot the Eastern Cottontail bunny?



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In 2019 we found this bunny hiding in the leaves. It was still quite small. Look at how big the leaves are compared to the bunny in the photo above.

