

Bunny Brochure

Category : General Wildlife Info

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Cottontail bunnies are small, fragile and fluffy, and bring out the nurturing nature of humans. Unfortunately cottontail bunnies often die of stress from the good intentions of people who do not trust nature to provide adequate protection for these young animals.

The female creates a nest for her babies by making a shallow indentation in the ground called a scrape. She lines this scrape with dry grass and with fur plucked from her chest. This creates a warm, dry, water repellent, comfortable resting place for the babies. Mammal babies whose eyes are closed have no odor so predators cannot smell them. Predators can, however, watch the mother and follow her to the nest when she nurses her young. As the babies grown and develop they begin to wiggle in the nest and this movement also attracts some predators.

These nests are frequently constructed in the middle of a lawn, in the open, to the amazement of homeowners. Cottontails were accustomed to prairie life before the advent of man and the tall grasses protected the nest. They do not realize that the kind of grass has changed and that humans consider short, mowed grass aesthetically pleasing. Nor do cottontails recognize pet dogs and cats as predators because they have no genetic memory of such animals. They recognize the scent of coyotes and foxes and bobcats as predators because these are native animals who have lived with cottontails for many hundreds of years.

When a nest of bunnies is discovered people wrongly think that, because humans have touched them, they must now be raised by rehabilitators. This is another old wives tale which must be dispelled over and over again. The mother rabbit will continue to feed and groom her litter of young despite the scent of human hands. She is no different from a human mother would welcome back her child who came home smelling of cheap perfume.

Cottontail females are the sole providers for the young. The males provide the genetic makeup and then go about their lives. Because rabbits are true herbivores they must forage almost constantly to have enough nourishment. They are induced ovulators so they mate shortly after giving birth to a litter. A female must eat enough to sustain herself, feed her babies, and nourish her gestating litter. This leaves her only enough time to nurse her bunnies once or twice a day. She does this at night and it only takes 3 to 5 minutes.

Cottontails are not physically able to move their young either with their mouths or with their feet so if an occupied nest is suddenly empty it has most likely be predated. Mom rabbits cannot find a nest of bunnies that has been moved although some success has been realized by moving the nest no more than a few feet each day until the nest is out of danger.

To determine whether or not bunnies are orphaned place dental floss over the nest in a tick-tack-toe pattern, overlapping the nest by several inches. If the floss pattern has been disturbed after the next

two feeding times the bunnies are being fed by the mother. Another way is to feel the tummy of each bunny. If the tummy is slightly rounded, the mom is feeding; if the tummy is sunken something has happened to mom and the bunnies need to be admitted to rehabilitation.

There was an old belief that in order to return bunnies to the nest a disguising scent had to be put on the bunnies. This was often a drop of vanilla. We now know that, unlike some domestic livestock, wildlife does not recognize the scent of humans as an incursion. Adding the scent of vanilla or any other unnatural scent does, however, attract predators to a nest of bunnies who have no scent of their own.

Cottontail bunnies are difficult for rehabilitators to raise because they die easily of stress related disorders. Captive bunnies can be cannibalistic. Even though bunny's digestive systems are not fully understood, scientific formulas used by rehabilitators provide optimum nutrition and are superior to the old "home made" formulas. Because of advances in wildlife medicine the success rate of raising orphaned cottontails is considerably higher than in the past but mom is still a bunny 's best chance for survival.

As with other wildlife, cat caught bunnies almost always die from the bacteria in the mouth of the cat. Since many of the bacterias found in cat saliva are also airborne bunnies can get pneumonia if a cat breaths on them. Even if there is no visible damage from the cat, their needle like teeth can often inject bacteria into the fragile skin of a bunny. This bacteria is left on the fur even if the cat only holds the bunny in its mouth. It is then groomed off by the individual or his litter mates causing fatal infection.

Bunnies leave the nest and the care of their mothers when they are 3 - 4 weeks old. At this time their eyes are open, they are eating grass and, more importantly, weeds, their ears are erect, they are fluffy, they can run. However their first line of defense is the same mechanism which protected them in the prairie or the forest - freezing. A frozen bunny sits perfectly still, can be approached and even picked up, because he thinks he cannot be seen. If he remains quiet in the hands of a human this is a sure indication that he is in shock and will die unless he is released . Humans must not mistake this behavior for contentment.

Bunnies born in a lawn or garden will not remain there as adults. The young will disperse within 6 - 8 weeks. Only 10% of the bunnies born in the wild survive. Cottontails prefer weeds and native plants to garden vegetables so leaving a small "rabbit patch" for them is sometimes the best way to protect ornamentals. Baby powder can protect flowers and plants as can several other commercial products.

Best of all, when cottontails are allowed to thrive homeowners sometimes have the opportunity to observe the "rabbit dance". This is the mating ritual during which male and female frolic on the lawn, jump over each other, and provide humans with awesome entertainment.