Alaska Department of
Fish & Game

Hares

There are two species of hares in Alaska, both of which turn white in the winter. The **snowshoe**, or **varying hare** *(Lepus americanus)*, is the most common and widespread of these. It is distributed throughout the state except for the lower Kuskokwim Delta, the Alaska Peninsula, and the area north of the Brooks Range. It is sparsely distributed along the southeastern mainland except for major river deltas. The Alaskan hare *(Lepus othus)*, also called the tundra hare, populates much of the western coast of Alaska, including the Alaska Peninsula, but has a spotty distribution along the Arctic coast and the north slope of the Brooks Range.

Hares are often called rabbits, and both are members of the family Leporidae. However, hares are born fully furred and with eyes open, while newborn rabbits are blind and hairless.

General description: Snowshoe hares are somewhat larger than cottontail rabbits *(Sylvilagus spp.)*. They average around 18 to 20 inches (.5 m) in total length and weigh 3 to 4 pounds (1.4-1.8 kg). In summer, the coat is yellowish to grayish brown with white underparts, and the tail is brown on top. This coat is shed and replaced by white pelage in winter, but the hairs are dusky at the base and the underfur is gray. The ears are dark at the tips. The large hind feet are well-furred, adapting these animals for the deep snows of the boreal forests—hence the name "snowshoe."

The Alaskan hare is larger—22 to 28 inches (.5-.7 m) in length and 6 to 12 pounds (2.7-5.4 kg) in weight. The winter coat of this large hare is long, and the fur is white to the base. The edges of the ears are blackish. In summer, the coat is grayish brown above and white below, with a whitish base to the hairs. The tail is entirely white.

Life history: Snowshoe hares breed at about 1 year of age and have two to three litters per year. The gestation period is 36 to 37 days. First litters are born around the middle of May in Interior Alaska and average about four leverets (young hares). The second litter, in years of increasing abundance, often averages six young, and occasionally there is a third litter. Females breed immediately after the birth of a litter.

The leverets are born in an unlined depression or "form." They weigh about two ounces (57 g) at birth and can walk by the time their fur is dry. In a day or two they are wandering about the nest, and in less than two weeks will be eating green vegetation. They nurse for about a month. The color pattern of the young snowshoe is similar to the summer pattern of adults.

Breeding habits of the Alaskan hare are similar, but the reproductive season usually begins later, and there is probably only one litter per year. The leverets are darker than the adults with a black tinge to their fur.

Habitat: Snowshoe hares are found in mixed spruce forests, wooded swamps, and brushy areas. They feed on a wide variety of plant material—grasses, buds, twigs, and leaves in the summer and spruce twigs and needles, bark, and buds of hardwood such as aspen and willow in the winter. The Alaskan hare is generally found on windswept, rocky slopes and upland tundra, often in groups. These big hares usually avoid lowlands and wooded areas. They feed on willow shoots and various dwarf arctic plants.

Hares are most active at dusk and dawn. They do not dig burrows or build nests but use natural shelters and depressions and rest under branches or bushes. The snowshoe hare travels about on well-established trails or runways which become deeply worn in the snow or forest floor. It is interesting that the winter trails through the deep snow follow the summer pathways.

Populations of snowshoe hares are subject to cycles of high abundance and scarcity. The population in an area will build

up over a period of years to a peak of abundance, followed by a sudden decline to a very low level. During periods of peak abundance there are as many as 600 animals per square mile (230/km^2) of range. The exact cause or causes for the decline are unknown. Some possibilities include overbrowsing their food supply, predators, shock disease due to stress, parasites, or a combination of these.

Economic importance: Snowshoe hares are one of the more important food items of northern furbearers, particularly lynx. They are often an important source of food for Alaskans. The Arctic hare is also important as a source of food and fur. In times of great abundance, the snowshoe hares may kill brush by overbrowsing. In "high" years they may compete with big game animals such as moose for forage.

Both species of hare offer a great deal of recreation for the small game hunter, especially in years of abundance. The Alaskan hare provides an unusual trophy and a considerable amount of meat. The snowshoe hare is available to more hunters and can be taken near highway systems and in such disturbed areas as mine tailing piles. Hares are best hunted with a shotgun and birdshot, or .22-caliber rifle or handgun. Early snowfalls will often catch the snowshoe hare still in its summer coat, making it vulnerable to the hunter. The meat is quite tasty.

Hunters should be alert for signs of tularemia, a bacterial disease found in hares and rodents throughout the world. Such signs include general sluggishness and spots on the liver and spleen. Normal sanitary precautions should be taken when handling hares, and rubber gloves should be used when cleaning and dressing them. The meat should be cooked thoroughly.

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