



MAKE HABITAT A HABIT

HARE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW

By Barbara Caswell



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Rabbits tend to polarize gardeners, who either identify with Elmer Fudd battling his arch enemy or Beatrix Potter passing happy hours with her fuzzy friend. My pal Bea and I think alike: when I saw a jackrabbit on the country property we hoped to buy, I was sold. A jackrabbit means you've really left the city behind.

That's because a jackrabbit, unlike an adaptable raccoon or squirrel, is unable to survive in populated areas, due to dogs, cars and noise. In fact, a friend of mine, who specializes in the rescue of hares, says that no one can enter their enclosures wearing nylon running pants, because the rasping sends her hypersensitive jacks into a panicky self-destructive race. She must also keep plastic bag sounds out of their hearing. We wondered if perhaps those noises remind them of rustling bushes where predators lurk.

Rabbits and hares are the ultimate prey animals: they're delicious and pretty much everybody else in the animal world eats them. Because they have no effective defenses other than running, they have developed astounding abilities in that one skill.

There's a common misperception that hares live in burrows, but that is only true for rabbits.

In the Bay Area, we occasionally see the smaller, rounder Cottontail or Brush Rabbits, but the Blacktail Jackrabbit, actually a hare, is the bony fellow most often spotted in rural prairie grasses. He is casual about being observed, confident that he can bound away in 20-foot leaps, sometimes at 35 mph. He is not a rodent, but a *lagomorph*, with the elusive ability to change direction in

mid-leap or spring six feet straight up just to get his bearings. Small plane pilots taking off are sometimes astonished to see jacks pacing their planes.

A friend asked me once where jackrabbits go during the winter, and I truthfully answered that I didn't know, but I suspect that most of them don't "go" anywhere. They're most likely consumed by other animals who need to eat in order to live themselves. In the spring, the lucky remaining survivors start giving birth to the next batches.



Once a farm pest; today extinct in the 'burbs. Although I hunched motionless in her pen, this sensitive jackrabbit's anxiety continued to build, until she began to risk her own safety with erratic behavior and I had to leave.

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Physically, a jackrabbit has some fascinating features. Those jackass ears (where these hares got their name) not only catch every tiny rustling sound, but can dissipate heat through their blood vessels, perfect for this desert dweller.

Human vision is so different from the hare's that we would also have to be "hare-brained" to comprehend such a wide-angled image.

In an adult's chiseled face, these side-placed eyes protrude, which gives him vision virtually all the way around his head. Our eyes are forward-looking, and provide as much information as our meager brains are capable of absorbing. The narrow skull of a hare, on the other hand, can interpret the sights and sounds of two IMAX movies, one before and one behind him, in an incredible wide-angled sensurround scene. Just think! All those experimental film techniques with wrap-around screens could have succeeded if hares had bought the tickets!



Luckily, most of us aren't farmers defending livelihoods, and so can enjoy the sight of wildlife around us as part of the scenery. In a suburban setting, big ears probably mean an escaped domestic pet, but in the country, you might get your personal vineyard all installed before you give thought to night visitors.

A hare was designed to live in wide open spaces, and when those spaces disappear, the hares do too. They are comfortable in large grassy fields where they feel secure in their ability to put distance between themselves and predators.

Wild hares don't survive things like trapping, or trips to animal shelters. Excluding lagomorphs from your garden is the only humane solution, and it's kindest to leave some other space open for wild animals, if possible. Unless you have a commercial operation, it's unlikely that you really need to cultivate an entire field. Rabbits might require deeper barriers, but the shallow-burrowing hares are usually discouraged by wire fencing only about



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Jackrabbits are nocturnal and sleep during the day in "forms," which are just scraped out hollows under shrubs, and even have their babies above ground. Unlike rabbits, hares have large, furred babies with open eyes.

2-3 feet high and buried less than a foot, as hares don't enjoy jumping fences.

Incidentally, my jackrabbit-rescuing friend says that her hares prefer grasses with seed heads to any grape leaves she's offered. Also, mothers leave their babies for many hours during the day, so you shouldn't assume that one is an orphan unless it's still alone at night.

During a recent trip to Arizona, we had to chance to visit Regina Whitman, the dynamo who operates *Desert Cry*, a rehab center for desert animals. She is regarded as an expert on hares, and helped create minimum standards and protocols for similar organizations. The cover photograph shows her beautiful Antelope Jackrabbit, which is taller than the Blacktails we have in the Bay Area.

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