

# About Rabbits



Most predators have razor sharp eyesight and watch for the slightest movement as they search for a meal. Avian predators combine sight with keen hearing to help detect prey, while mammalian predators have the additional ability to smell their quarry and rely on this capability to know when prey is in close proximity. Once the odor is discovered, the senses of sight and hearing are peaked and when the prey loses its nerve and bolts from the hunting predator, it either escapes or is caught.

Rabbits are a prey species, plain and simple. They multiply quickly during the warmer months and provide food for most predators. That's their job. Of course, rabbits are not willing participants in this relationship and, like all other prey species, spend their lives trying to avoid being eaten. They do this by simply hiding in thick cover and remaining motionless, thus avoiding that movement that a predator could detect. If the remaining motionless thing doesn't work, rabbits flee danger by using their large rear legs to propel themselves to safety. Every rabbit knows that it can outrun most other creatures, so if it believes it's being chased, it will usually continue to run at jogging speed ahead of its pursuer. When running away isn't working, they will sometimes as a last resort "hole up," or dive down a groundhog hole to escape their pursuer. I've heard stories of rabbits jumping up and running along logs to throw off dogs. Now, I'm not sure how much intelligence rabbits have. But I once personally watched a rabbit that was being trailed by my dogs run down an embankment and jump into a pond, swim to the other side, climb out and continue on. The chase ended abruptly at the water's edge. Now, that rabbit could've easily avoided the water by running around the small pond, but chose to jump in and swim. I just stood there in complete amazement watching as it safely vanished from sight.

Each rabbit is quite familiar with its home area since it has lived its whole life in just several acres and it is this fact that makes hunting with beagles successful. You see, when a rabbit is flushed from its hiding place and dogs start to trail it, it will run ahead of the dogs until it reaches the end of its home range. At this point it will have to make a quick decision, continue into unfamiliar territory or head back to known safe places. It will almost always turn and head back into the heart of its home range. Many people mistakenly believe that the dogs somehow bring the rabbit back to the hunter, but rest assured it's the rabbit's decision to return. The hunter should be positioned in a spot near where the rabbit was first jumped since it will normally return to this location. Remain still because as the rabbit moves ahead of the dogs it is constantly scanning ahead watching for movement. Sometimes the "chase" will continue for more than an hour as the rabbit continues to circle back into its home area over and over. As it grows tired of being chased it will often end the game by running down a hole where it finds safety.

**By Steve Hower**  
**Pennsylvania Game Commission**  
**Connecting you with wildlife!**  
11/17/2010