



Desert cottontail

Image courtesy of Jessie Eastland



A desert cottontail on its hind legs

Image courtesy of Isabel Gibson

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Fort Selden Historic Site
1280 Ft. Selden Rd.
Radium Springs, NM 88054

Phone (575) 526-8911
Regional Office: (575) 202-1638
nmhistoricsites.org

FORT SELDEN

HISTORIC SITE

DESERT COTTONTAIL



At about 250,000 square miles, the Chihuahuan Desert covers a large portion of North America from Northern Mexico through the Southwestern United States. It is home to around 1,000 different species of animals. Each of these animals have specific characteristics that help them survive in the desert environment.

In this brochure, learn about the desert cottontail, one species found in the Chihuahuan Desert.

Be sure to keep an eye out for some of these fluffy animals while at Fort Selden. You may just spy one or two!

Physical Characteristics

This rabbit's tail looks exactly like a cottonball which is why it is called a cottontail. They are lightly colored in tan or gray and the fur on the bellies is usually white. The bottom of their tail is white too. They have big ears and big hind feet and their tracks are shaped like a 7. Cottontails are smaller than other rabbits such as jackrabbits.

Diet

Desert cottontails' main source of food is grass but they also eat different desert plants such as grass, shrubs, mesquite leaves, and beans. Their main source of water is what they get from the plants they eat or the dew that gathers on the plants.

Habitat

Desert cottontails can live in a lot of different habitats such as grasslands as well as in shrubs, in areas near water, and in forests. They can be seen resting in shaded areas underneath bushes. They have even adapted to humans living close in proximity to them that they are sometimes seen sunbathing in the grassy areas of neighborhoods.

Senses

They make sure to stay out of the heat the best they can and usually only come out of hiding in the early mornings or at night. Their large ears help with the temperatures of the desert. Their ears have blood vessels that can radiate body heat into the air.

Predators

The desert cottontail has many predators, more than most animals. Humans, coyotes, rattlesnakes, badgers, and owls are still predators to the desert cottontail.

Interesting Facts

- These furry friends run in a zig zag pattern to better escape the predator they are running away from. They can run up to 20 miles per hour to get away from predators! If the predator corners them, they can use their back legs and kick the predator away.

- Cottontails are coprophagic, meaning they eat their own feces. This sounds unpleasant, but this helps their body receive all the nutrients they need. Since grass is difficult to digest, eating their own pellets allows for body to better digest any nutrients from the plants that they consume.

- A female may bear young year round or up to eight months of the year. She may bear twenty to thirty young in four to five litters. A normal litter has two to six young, which are born blind, furless, and unable to care for themselves. The mother returns to the den site to feed her young. The young are weaned at two weeks old, and they leave the nest area three weeks after birth.

- Cottontails can breed at eighty days old, then mate again soon after giving birth.

- Their cottontails aren't just for looks. When a cottontail raises its tail, the large white patch underneath is

exposed. This is a signal to other rabbits that danger is nearby.

- The desert cottontail eats on all fours. It can only use its nose to move and adjust the position of the food that it places directly in front of its front paws on the ground. The cottontail turns the food with its nose to find the cleanest part of the vegetation (free of sand and inedible parts) to begin its meal. The only time a cottontail uses its front paws to enable eating is when vegetation is above its head on a living plant. The cottontail then lifts a paw to bend the branch and bring the food within reach.

- A male's home range may be up to fifteen acres in size. A female's home range can be less than one acre.

- Cottontails have been known to swim or climb trees when pursued by prey.

- Desert cottontails are more "colonial" than jackrabbits. They may not interact with their neighbors, but they tolerate closer neighbors than jackrabbits do. Desert cottontails rarely stray far from their natal or birthplace area.

- Cottontails are colorblind.