

Cottontail population nearing bottom of 10-year cycle

BY UTAH DIVISION OF WILDLIFE RESOURCES
Special to the Standard-Examiner

Cottontail rabbits have done really well in Utah over the past few years. It was only a matter of time, though, before the ups and downs of a 10-year population cycle caught up to them.

This year, there are about half as many rabbits in Utah as there was in 2017. And the current number is a tenth of what it was when the population experienced its latest peak in 2015.

Fewer rabbits doesn't mean you shouldn't head afield and hunt them, though. Jason Robinson, upland game coordinator for the Division of Wildlife Resources, says there are still plenty of rabbits in Utah. "You'll likely have to walk farther and cover

more ground to find them," he says, "but they're there."

Robinson says the cottontail rabbit hunt is a great hunt for hunters of all ages and abilities, including those who are just getting started. "The terrain rabbits live in is usually relatively flat and easy to walk through," he says. "The equipment needed is basic, light and easy to carry. And — if you do get into a bunch of rabbits — you'll get lots of shots."

You can see where rabbits live in Utah, and learn more about them, on pages 38 and 48 of the 2018–2019 Utah Upland Game Guidebook. The free guidebook is available online.

FOUR COUNTIES HAVE THE HIGHEST NUMBERS

Biologists aren't sure why it occurs, but cottontail rabbits across the

country experience a 10-year population cycle. After bottoming out, the number of cottontails will climb slowly for about five years. Once the population peaks in number, it will usually stay close to the peak for about three years. Then, numbers will abruptly fall for a couple of years until the population bottoms out and numbers start to climb again.

From late July through mid-August, DWR biologists count rabbits along 15 survey routes in the state. Based on what the biologists saw, four counties — Duchesne and Uintah in northeastern Utah, and Emery and Iron in southern Utah — are the areas with the highest number of rabbits this year.

"Rabbit numbers were best in those four counties," Robinson says. "With the exception of Iron County — where rabbits are doing well —

the western half of Utah was the area where biologists saw the fewest rabbits."

Utah's cottontail rabbit hunt runs until Feb. 28, 2019.

FINDING RABBITS

To find rabbits in lower elevations, look in the bottom of valleys that have tall sagebrush and deep, loose soil that have burrows the rabbits can hide in. If you're in mid-elevation areas, look for hillsides that have large boulders, thick sagebrush or other thick vegetation in which the rabbits can hide.

Also, consider hunting early in the morning and late in the afternoon. "That's when rabbits are away from their resting areas and are the most active," Robinson says. "Early morning and late in the afternoon are prime times for rabbits to feed."

HUNTING TIPS

Shotguns and small-caliber rifles, such as the .22, are perfect firearms to hunt rabbits with.

If you're hunting with a small-caliber rifle, finding a spot that's higher in elevation than the area around it — and then sitting down, scanning the surrounding area and waiting for rabbits to appear — is a good choice. It's critical to hunt early in the morning or late in the afternoon, when rabbits are the most active and moving around.

If you'd like to walk and flush rabbits out of cover, a shotgun is the best firearm to use. If you're hunting with one or more people, form a line — spacing each hunter about 20 yards apart — and then walk through areas that look promising. Be ready to click your safety off: a flushing rabbit doesn't give you much time to shoot!

Rock Hounding in a UTV near Mt. Hillers

As guests of Capt. Ray Golden at the Ticaboo Resort near Bull Frog Marina, we made more than one OHV foray into the backcountry. Ray had gathered representatives of several ATV clubs throughout the state to announce plans to expand his North Lake Powell Adventure Services.

Having gathered this group, he was not going to miss a chance to show off some of the spectacular trails available from the Ticaboo Lodge. Coming from the east, his expertise was in water sports. When he got a taste of the ATV trails in Utah, he was hooked. Now we were benefiting from his excitement.

Gathering at the Ticaboo Adventure Center, we lined up and followed Capt. Ray north. The trail twisted through the sand in the high plains desert and was fun to ride.

Turning right following Shitamaring Creek, we crossed a pasture as we

worked our way north. During the ride we took on this trail last May, we had to negotiate our way through a herd of cows. It was without cows on this November day.

The walls began to close in rising high on both sides as we wound through the wash created by Shitamaring Creek. It was dry now, but there was enough evidence of high water for me to be glad it was dry. The beauty of the sandstone cliffs was in contrast to the deep cobalt blue of the clear fall day.

As we worked our way up the wash, we passed a speed limit sign attached to a large boulder.

Climbing out of the wash, the trail took us through the Shooting Uranium Mine. This is supposed to be an active mine, but it didn't look very active on this day. We



Lynn Blamires
ATV Adventures

continued our ride, crossing over Copper Creek. The track took us northeast. Passing historic Starr Ranch, the remains of a homesteading effort gone badly, we went on to Star Creek Campground where we stopped for lunch.

Situated on the east side at the base of Mt. Hillers, the Star Campground is well laid out. There is plenty of shade and the outhouses are clean — they even feature hand sanitizer!

Mt. Hillers is one of five peaks in the Henry Mountain Range. John Wesley Powell named this mountain after John Karl Hiller, the chief expedition photographer on his exploration of the Grand Canyon. It is the third highest peak in the Henry Mountain Range.

We sloshed through ankle-deep leaves to eat our

lunch on sturdy concrete picnic tables. We might have stayed longer, but those cement benches got cold.

Leaving the campground, we continued a short distance around the peak, passing Ghost Ridge and making a loop toward the west into a geologic creation known as the Morrison Formation.

Characterized by the layers of white, gray and red in the surrounding hills, the evidence of dinosaurs was scattered all over the ground. We found good specimens of coprolite and gastroliths. Coprolite is petrified dinosaur dung and gastroliths are also known as dinosaur stomach stones. Coprolite can be quite colorful and the gastroliths have an unmistakable smooth feel to them — almost greasy to the touch. There is a spirit about this evidence of previous life.

Riding back past the campground, we turned down south coming to another



PHOTO SUPPLIED, LYNN BLAMIRES

This section of the Morrison Formation included petrified wood.

section of the Morrison Formation near Milk Creek Reservoir. This area looked like a lumber yard with pieces of flat petrified wood scattered on the ground all around us. Some of it looked like pieces of wood paneling. While this kind is sand-colored, there are pieces that are very colorful. Petrified wood also has a spirit about it — evidence of something that was once living.

Heading back to the Ticaboo Lodge, we took the same

route down through the wash. The ride was not the same, however. The sun was at a different angle and had warmed the towering sandstone walls of the wash, making it almost a different ride.

Taking this ride in November, it felt good to be wearing a coat. When you go, take plenty of water, keep the rubber side down and make your own discoveries in the Henry Mountains.

Contact Lynn Blamires at quadmanone@gmail.com.



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