



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

December 8th, 2023

Desert Cottontail



Desert Cottontail during intake.



Patient with greens in enclosure.

The Desert Cottontail is named after their tail which resembles a cotton ball. They are found throughout the Western United States to Central Mexico. They prefer deserts, dry grasslands and shrublands. Cottontails are herbivores who forage for food (mainly grass), in low brush areas in the morning and evening. They also eat plant leaves, fruit, bark, and twigs. They receive hydration from their food and dew on plant leaves and rarely need to drink water.

Recently, we admitted two thin and dehydrated Desert Cottontails. The first was a juvenile who was transported by one of our volunteers from a local animal control center. After a thorough examination and fecal test, our staff found the patient had parasites, and mild inflammation on the right leg. The rabbit was moved into a quiet space to heal and prescribed pain and anti-inflammatory medications and antiparasitics. Over the next several days, the rabbit's appetite improved, readily foraging on greens and hay. Our technicians noticed the inflammation had also resolved, and the patient was actively hopping around the enclosure. After 11 days in care, this Desert Cottontail was released back to the site of origin in good health. All of our adult animals are released within a five-mile radius of where they were found.

Just four days later, we received another Desert Cottontail from Westlake Village. This rabbit was emaciated, had generalized full body weakness, and intermittent hind leg weakness. Our hospital staff also noticed a decreased level of alertness, which could be a result of head trauma. After running a fecal test, our technicians also found intestinal parasites, which explain the rabbit's poor body condition. The patient was put on pain medication and antiparasitics. Initially the patient had a poor appetite so was hand-fed an herbivore formula by syringe. Rabbits are very sensitive, so the technicians were careful to always cover the patient's eyes when feeding, to minimize any stress. The patient's appetite has improved, and they have now transitioned to eating greens. After five days in care, another fecal test was run. While the parasites were gone, our veterinarian found a high level of bacteria present so prescribed a round of antibiotics. Once the antibiotics are finished, another fecal test will be performed to make sure there are no additional infections before preparing to release the Desert Cottontail back into the wild.

If you find a wild animal and are unsure if assistance is needed, please call California Wildlife Center (310-458-9453) and we will advise the best steps to take.