



# California Wildlife Center

## Patient of the Week

### March 29, 2024

## Hippity Hoppity...Cottontails are on their way!



This Desert Cottontail with ears down is at the age they should still be in their den.



Young Desert Cottontail



Desert Cottontail released back in the wild.

With Spring holidays upon us, Spring animals arrive too. One of the heralds of the season are Desert Cottontails, a native rabbit to Southern California. These small brown and white lagomorphs are found across the Western United States and are common in our area. This will likely be another busy year for the Cottontail, as more will be born, as more rain and more food mean more births.

Desert Cottontails (not to be confused with Hares aka Jackrabbits, who have larger ears and hind legs) are small herbivores who seldom drink water, as they receive most of their liquid by consuming the dew on plants. They are also coprophagic, meaning that they eat their own feces. Like domestic rabbits, they produce two types of droppings. The first (cecotropes) has nutritional value and actually contain beneficial protein and vitamins, so they will eat it. The second type is true waste and will not be eaten. This is similar to when a cow chews cud.

So far this year, we have already received 22 Desert Cottontails. On average, we see 131 of this species each year. The most common reasons include being separated from their mother too soon and being caught by a cat or dog. However, rabbits in general are vulnerable to a variety of diseases, some of which can spread to humans like ringworm or other parasites. In the United States, we recently had an outbreak of Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease, which is described as the Ebola for rabbits. If that wasn't enough, Cottontails are particularly at risk to predators and every carnivore larger than them will eat them, including snakes who will prey upon baby bunnies. Adult rabbits' only defense is to freeze and then run in a zig zag pattern to evade. This is why the average life expectancy of a wild rabbit is just 1-2 years, unlike the domestic rabbit who may live 8-10 years. In fact, few rabbits survive to adulthood, which they reach at just three months old.

Baby bunnies given at Easter often turn up in parks shortly thereafter, as the owner mistakenly believes that they can thrive in the wild. It is more likely that they will be quickly predated upon as they lack the instincts and knowledge of their wild cousins. Domestic rabbits and wild rabbits are two wholly different species and if they mate, they are unlikely to produce viable offspring.

Mother rabbits will give birth to 1-6 kittens several times a year. She makes a shallow nest and lines it with fur and grasses. The young are born blind and bald but develop quickly. Cottontails are independent of their mothers at just three weeks. It's important to pay attention when mowing the grass, as these nests are vulnerable. If you do uncover a nest, replace whatever was on top and keep pets (especially cats) away for at least those few weeks until the young rabbits are able to escape. Cat bites are generally fatal for young native animals of any species.

These social animals are crepuscular, meaning that they are most active at sunrise and sunset. And whether they're named Bugs, Peter, Thumper, Trix, Jessica, Energizer, Br'er, Bunnacula, Harvey, or Velveteen, we think rabbits are best eaten when made from chocolate!