

Our Native Mammals.

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The hare (*Lepus sylvaticus*) like the weasel is probably descended through several evolutionary periods from parents that must have experienced great climatic changes, or some other wonderful processes. One is led to this conclusion because these animals change the colour of their fur with the change of the seasons, white in winter and brownish in summer, so that their colour corresponds and blends with their surroundings. The hare is most harmless and inoffensive, so far as weapons of offence and defence are concerned. They however do some damage to the crops of the agriculturist. To some extent they feed upon and trample down clovers and oats; but it is only when they eat the bark from young fruit trees that they are regarded as really destructive. Their food consists of grasses and like tender plants in summer, but in winter they have to depend upon the twigs, buds and barks of many varieties of shrubs and trees. Their diet in summer has to be supplemented, it would appear, by such material as gravel. This has always been to me a mystery.

The young are reared during the summer months, and it is quite probable that two or three litters may be produced by one female in a single season. From two to five young comprise a litter. These are cared for by the female for a few weeks and then are left to shift for themselves.

They soon learn many tricks which serve as a means of protection to themselves and others that may be near when danger threatens. On different occasions when a hare has been startled while feeding they have been known to thump upon the ground with their hind feet for the first few jumps as they retreated to cover. When they have been known to make these thumps it was a sure sign that another hare was near and within hearing of this danger signal, which seems to be their only method of audible communication to their fellows. Their cry of distress or fear is a shrill squeak.

The hares are largely nocturnal in their movements, and when not feeding or sporting with their own kind, they sit in some well protected spot, where their colours blend well with surrounding objects. If undisturbed the same "form," the name given to the place or nest where hares sit, is occupied for years. In one instance which has come under

observation, the same "form" was occupied, evidently by the same animal, for two years, at the end of that time the occupant was gathered into the banquet-hall of a great horned owl. The "form" has never been occupied since that time; so we may conclude the same animal had its favourite place of rest in that spot for two years. When captured by the owl it was feeding upon twigs of a yellow birch within a few yards of its home.

To be a place of safety the "form" of the hare must be selected with some ingenuity. The number of its enemies is so great that many precautions to ensure safety must be considered. There should be sufficient cover overhead to serve as protection against the keen eyes of the hawks and owls. They must select a place where they can guard their back tracks, to observe any carnivorous animals that may be following them, and at the proper time slip noiselessly from their hiding-place and flee with great speed from the impending danger. If pursued by a fox or lynx their powers of speed are taxed to the utmost. It is only when they have a chance to dodge about in thick cover that they can escape these enemies.

A hare will often start out upon short migrations and travel several miles across country, perhaps to escape enemies, to seek pastures new, or in search of mates. In summer hares are often attacked by a parasite, locally known as the big blue louse, or rabbit louse. They are often killed by the attacks of these insects, which are so numerous that at times the hare is half covered with them. These same blue lice also prey upon squirrels and grouse. Three instances have come to my notice in this neighbourhood of children having these vermin upon them. The insects were discovered soon after beginning to bite, but so tenaciously did they cling to their victims that they had to be removed with a knife. This will serve to show how difficult a matter it would be for the smaller animals to rid themselves of these pests.

We have only one species of hare in the Maritime Provinces, and it is commonly known as the rabbit. Somewhere in an article written upon the lynxes, there is a statement that the "cotton-tail" rabbit is the chief food of these animals. This statement would cause many readers unacquainted with our fauna, to believe that the "cotton-tail" is native here, which is a great mistake, it being indigenous to the south and west of this country. Having