

The Pygmy Rabbit

Brachylagus idahoensis

This worksheet provides the necessary tools for accurate identification of pygmy rabbits as well as their habitat and sign. Please contact one of the UDWR biologists listed at the end of this document to report sightings.



Photo – BLM Idaho

Adult Pygmy Rabbit

Identification

Pygmy Rabbit

- Length: 23.5-29.5 cm (9.2-11.6 in.)
- Weight: 398-462 g (0.88-1.02 lbs.)
- Ears: 57-64 cm (2 ¼-2 ½ in.)
- Uniform colored tail.
- Pale buff marking on trailing edge of ear.

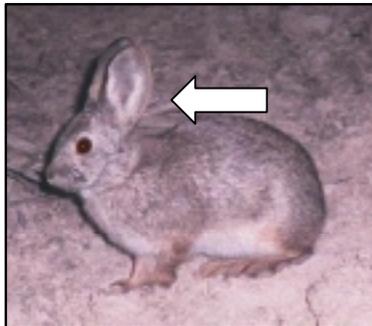
Mountain Cottontail (for comparison)

- Length: 30-36 cm (12-14 in.)
- Weight: 700-1300 g (1.5-3 lbs.)
- Ear Length: 56-66 cm (2 1/5- 2 3/5 in.)
- White underside to tail.

Smallest of all North American rabbits – half the mass of a mountain cottontail. Adult females, on average, are larger than adult males. Most easily confused with juvenile cottontails, but distinguished from all rabbit species in Utah by the uniform brown coloration of its tail (see comparison photos below). Neutral coloration and small size of tail may give the impression in the field that the species is tailless. Look also for the pale buff marking on entire trailing edge of ear.



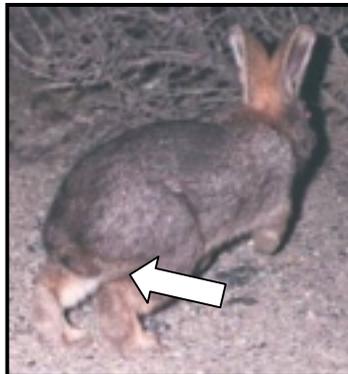
Blk-tailed Jackrabbit



Pygmy Rabbit



Cottontail Rabbit



Photos by Eveline Sequinn



Photo by Eveline Sequin

Pygmy rabbit pellets with Leatherman for size reference.

Sign – Pellets:

Pellets are round and 2-5 mm in diameter (similar to what a Tic-Tac looks like end-on). Several rabbit species can produce similar pellet sizes, but almost always in association with larger, more typical pellets. Often pellet densities are high (even when rabbit densities are not) due to the rabbit’s habitual behavior. High densities of small pellets are diagnostic.

Habitat & Ecology

Habitat: Several aspects of pygmy rabbit ecology create an extremely close association between the rabbits and dense, tall stands of sagebrush. Pygmy rabbits are the only rabbits in North America to dig their own burrows. Landscape selection by rabbits is linked very closely with the availability of deep, loose soils in which to construct burrows (2-7 openings). Suitable pygmy rabbit habitat can often be found by searching for areas with deeper soils, as recognized by distinctly taller patches of sagebrush. Topography plays a very important role in soil deposition and therefore rabbit distribution, so pay special attention to old riverbeds, alluvial fans, and the base of hills where soils have slumped.

Sign – Burrows: Pygmy rabbits spend the majority of their lives within 30 meters of their burrows, leading to the high concentration of pellets often observed. Although the entrance of a burrow dug by pygmy rabbits averages 3-5” in diameter (slightly smaller than your fist), it is very common for pygmy rabbits to be using the much larger burrows of other animals. The presence of pellets at or near the burrow entrance will be your best indicator of the burrow’s occupancy by pygmy rabbits. Diet (winter: 81-99% sagebrush; summer: 51% sagebrush, 39% grasses, 10% forbs) indicates another important link pygmy rabbits have to healthy sagebrush ecosystems.



Pygmy rabbit burrow w/ 35 mm lens cap for

Photo by Mike Wolfe



Photo by Mike Wolfe

Pygmy rabbit habitat: Photo demonstrating sagebrush height/density response to deeper soils. Note height of foreground sagebrush in deep soils relative to that of the background sagebrush in shallower soils.

DWR Contacts

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