

Bunnies! By Dave deCaleta 3/2013

The rabbit is “the prince with a thousand enemies” wrote Richard Adams in *Watership Down* (a real treat if you haven’t read it). An integral part of forest and agricultural landscapes surrounding Keuka Lake, rabbits are a food for foxes, coyotes, weasels, bobcats, larger hawks and owls, domestic dogs and cats, and hunters. Black snakes and snapping turtles will also take the occasional kit (baby bunny).

Rabbits depend on camouflage as a first defense against predators. Once detected, they rely on speed (up to 30mph after a “jackrabbit” start) and sharp twists, turns, and leaps to get away. As is associated with their name, they are prolific breeders, having 3-4 litters of up to 5-6 kits per year. Most are lucky to live 3 years, the attrition rate to predators and highways being constant and high.

Rabbits eat a lot of green “stuff” prompting the question, “How do they get enough nutrition from grass and leaves?” Stuck between their large and small intestines is a large digestive organ called the cecum (in humans a vestige remains as the appendix). The cecum gets packed full of “green stuff” the rabbits eat, which is broken down by a host of bacteria and protozoa into digestible foods. At night, rabbits pass the digested material as “soft” pellets and reingest the pellets to further digest and absorb the nutrients produced by the cecal microbes. Yep, that’s right; rabbits have to eat their own poop to get the full benefit of all the “green stuff” they eat. It’s called “coprophagy.” Kind of makes you glad you’re not that kind of herbivore.

Two different rabbits live in the hills surrounding Keuka Lake, the cottontail rabbit and snowshoe hare.



Cottontail Rabbit



Snowshoe Hare

The cottontail stays brown all year and is at a disadvantage when snow covers the ground - it stands out. The snowshoe hare turns white in winter—an advantage when there is snow on the ground and a disadvantage during an open, snowless winter. The snowshoe’s hind feet are also much enlarged, forming “snowshoes” that allow it to run on top of the snow instead of sinking in like the cottontail.

These rabbits can cause extensive damage in vegetable gardens (remember Peter Rabbit and Farmer McGregor?). Such gardens are easily protected by rabbit fencing available at hardware stores.