



# Cottontail in no danger of becoming extinct

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Obviously, the desert cottontail is not on the endangered species roster. Sporting his trademark, a white puff of a tail, this small gray-blackish with rusty traces rodent is a common sight. He darts, streaks, hops, lounges and nibbles across the desert, including, alas, our yards and gardens.

Our cottontail (probably *Sylvilagus*

*auduboni*) is a member of the mammalian family *Leporidae* (order, *Lagomorpha*), which means the young (kittens, bunnies) are born naked, blind, helpless and are suckled by their mother in a fur-lined nest. Here, the nest is usually an underground burrow beneath desert trees and sheltered by undergrowth.

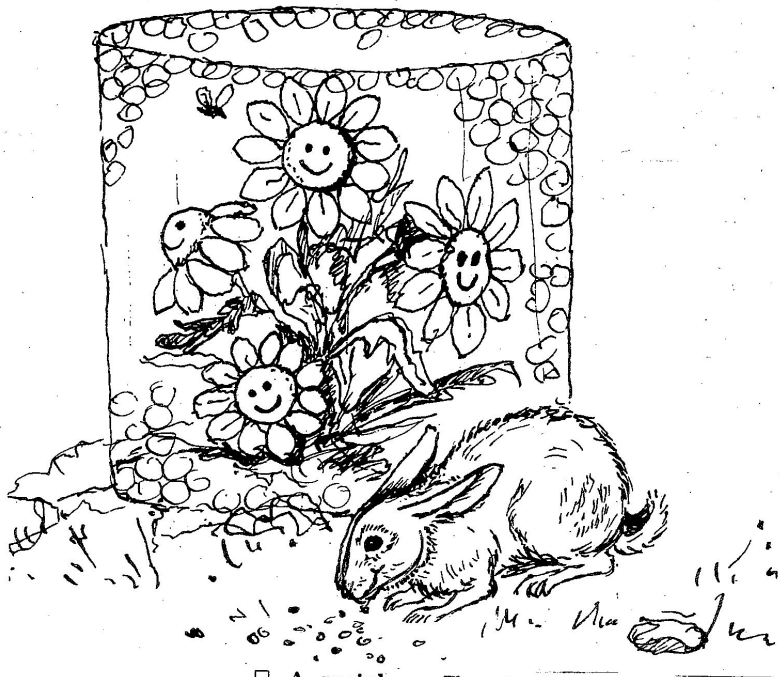
His diet is strictly vegetarian; the desert

floor his banquet table and anything tasty will be nibbled. He cannot reason the perimeter of man's property, or that the vegetation planted inside is off-limits as a culinary delight. Being a survivor, a rabbit is quick to take advantage of a consistent food and water source and cool, damp shady places. Wherever the birds are encouraged, expect an abundance of cottontails, too. Birds and rodents calmly drink and dine together. Neither present a predation threat to the other. The enemy is a common foe and mutual alarm from harm signals are shared and heeded.

Often, the rabbit's habits do not endear him to man and he is generally considered a nuisance to be eliminated. However, destruction is not the best answer for his control. The rabbit is of considerable ecological importance. He serves as a buffer species providing the bulk of the diet for many predators (hawks, owls, coyotes, fox, mountain lion, etc.) that keeps nature's scales in balance.

Prevention and co-existence is a more intelligent and happier solution for cottontail yard control. An extra bonus with the natives is that they have already adjusted to survive in the harsh sun and soil. Choose the varieties of domestic vegetation that are naturally ignored. Protect the tender seedling, cacti, and young tree trunks with surrounding barriers such as chicken wire. The most successful vegetable gardens, from every consideration, are those that are completely enclosed. Plant the desired hybrid, but delicious, flowers within a patio's protective wall. Elevate some bird feeders and position ground-bird feeding areas away from where the most vulnerable plants are located.

Then, don't begrudge a few cottontails a sip of water and a free meal with the birds. Accept some trade-offs; the pleasure of observing bunnies' behavior and antics for a munched posey or two. With careful observation, the carbon-copy effect will fade and individuals with different personalities will emerge. One will be timid and shy, another bold and aggressive. This one wears a fluffier tail, that one is rustier behind the ears. Cat-like washing rituals can be very elaborate and games of tag and leapfrog are just for fun. Enjoy the cottontail entertainment — and your plants!



□ A reminder: Through the fall Community School program, the Conservation Committee will again offer its **Know Your Desert; Become acquainted with the Desert Foothills** — Wildlife Series. Topics will include:

- Cacti — Oct. 8.
- Hiking in Desert, and Emergency Survival — Oct. 18.
- Landscaping in the Desert — Oct. 18, at Andre's Nursery.
- Cave Creek History — Oct. 29.
- Birds — Nov. 5.
- Desert Ecology and Mammals — Nov. 12.
- Flowering and Non-flowering Plants — Nov. 19.

Speakers will be Foothills residents and guests knowledgeable in their field. A fee of \$2 per person will be requested for each lecture. The first class will convene at the Cave Creek School multi-purpose room on Thursday, Oct. 8, at 7:30 p.m. Persons wishing to hear only certain lectures may come and pay their \$2 on that night.