

Rabbit

Oryctolagus cuniculus (Linnaeus, 1778)

Order: Lagomorpha

The rabbit is so well known as to not really require description. Measuring from 45 to 70 cm from head to its short tail a fully grown male (buck) rabbit can weigh about 2.5 kg. The rabbit is of more squat appearance than the brown hare and lacks the black tips of the hare's longer ears. The rabbit's prominent eyes are placed well to the sides of its head, providing a wide field of vision to detect potential predators. Rabbits are lavishly endowed with scent glands which seem to be important in their social organisation and territoriality. Rabbits dig extensive burrows, or warrens, in dry soils or banks with entrance holes of about 20 cm, although they may sometimes nest in dense scrub. They leave their small, round droppings around the warren entrances and often on raised mounds such as old ant's nests. They mark the boundaries of their territories using scent glands under the chin.



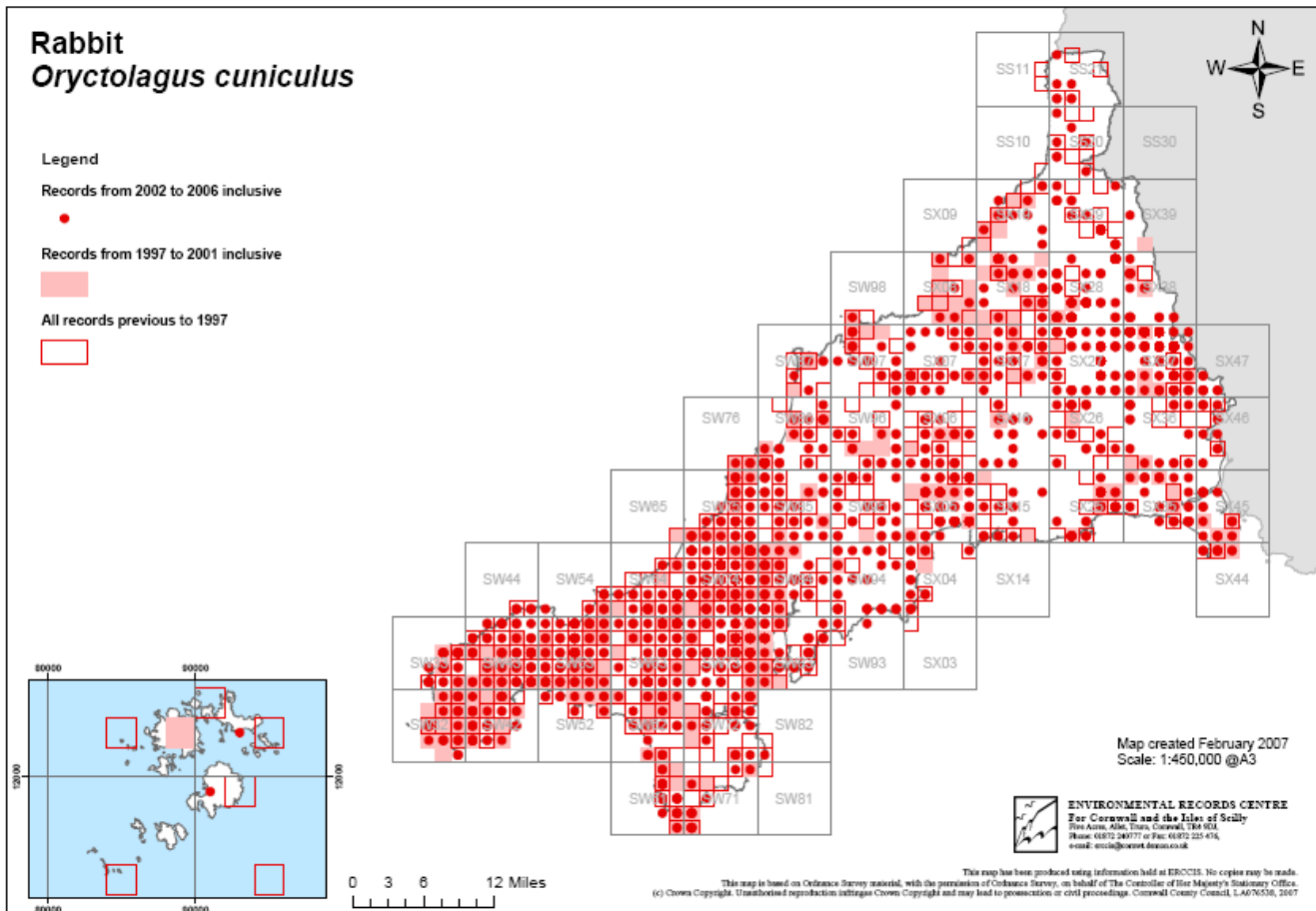
Rabbits breed from January to September and may raise up to 8 litters of 4-8 kits each year after a gestation of 30 days. The kits are born blind, deaf, and bald. After 10 days they open their eyes and after 25 days are able to leave the warren. The female (doe) may leave the young in the nest to feed, in which case she will seal the entrance to the nest with a plug of soil and vegetation. The young are sexually mature at 4 months and may breed in their first year. Rabbit society is structured around older, dominant bucks and does who defend a group territory around the warren. Subordinate animals are excluded and may dig themselves small isolated burrows. Rabbits tend to feed in groups and will signal danger by stamping their feet or standing upright, when running they flash their white tail which may also serve to alert other rabbits. Although most rabbits die during their first year they can live up to 9 years.

Rabbits occur wherever there is suitable ground for burrowing – they are more common in light, dry soils – but woodland edge, pasture, sand dunes, large gardens and embankments all provide suitable habitat.

Rabbits eat a variety of plants, favouring upright and cultivated grasses. They also eat many arable crops including cereal, root and leaf crops. Their impact on pasture land can result in closely nibbled turf with many annual weeds encouraged by the disturbance of the soil. This can provide useful habitat for insect and bird species. The rabbit uses a process called refection to extract the maximum nutritional benefit from their intake, they produce soft moist faecal pellets at night which they reingest.

Foxes, stoats and weasels are the principal natural predators of rabbits although badgers and domestic cats, along with buzzards will also take them. Gulls and crows will take rabbits, although normally as carrion. Rabbits are also subject to a number of external and internal parasites, one of these, the rabbit flea *Spilopsyllus cuniculi* is the carrier of the myxoma virus, the causative agent of myxomatosis which probably resulted in the death of 99% of the UK's rabbit population following its introduction in the 1950s.

Myxomatosis is a virus of a Brazilian forest rabbit *Sylvilagus brasiliensis* which causes relatively mild disease in its natural host. Rabbits are also heavily controlled by hunting – using shooting, trapping and ferreting. Many rabbits are killed by road traffic.



Local distribution and key sites

The Rabbit is the second most recorded mammal species in Cornwall and the species is widespread across the county.

Number of records per date class

2002 to 2006 inclusive 2094

1997 to 2001 inclusive 368

All records previous to 1997 773

Total 3241

Rabbits originate from the western Mediterranean and North Africa. Probably introduced into the UK by the Normans, they were originally bred for meat and fur but escaped and set up wild colonies. They started to become a pest species only in the last 200 years, and had reached an estimated population of 100 million before the introduction of myxomatosis in the 1950s. Rabbits have also been introduced into Australia and New Zealand where they have caused major environmental damage.

Rabbits are common throughout their ranges and regarded as a pest species in many areas.

Survey Methods

Hunt returns

Road casualty records

Field surveys

Did you know?

Also known as Coney, 'rabbit' originally referred only to the young animals. Rabbits are incapable of vomiting, probably as a result of the refection process.

Key references

McBride, A (1989) Rabbits and hares. Whittet Books, London