

Tree Squirrels and Rabbits are Active in Winter

Barb Ogg
UNL Extension Educator

Many animals seem to disappear in the wintertime. Some animals, like opossums, skunks, ground hogs and bats hibernate or go dormant so they can survive when there is no food for them to eat. When animals hibernate, their heart rate slows, body temperature drops and breathing slows down. Hibernating animals don't need to feed. Instead, they live off stored fat they gained during the late summer and fall.

Two common animals active during the winter are tree squirrels and cottontail rabbits. These animals don't hibernate, but use other behaviors to survive winter.



Soni Cochran, UNL Extension in Lancaster County

A National Pest Control Association survey rated tree squirrel as the number one nuisance animal in America

Tree Squirrels

Even though ground squirrels hibernate, tree squirrels don't. During the winter, they are active between dawn and mid-day, but limit activities by staying in their fur-lined nest, called a drey, until the next day. During winter storms, or severe cold, the squirrel may stay in its nest for days. An adult squirrel normally lives alone, but will share its nest with other squirrels to conserve body heat. Once the temperature rises, the guests will be on their way.

During the summer and fall, squirrels provision their territory by burying nuts and seeds in the ground, often in the lawn and in flower beds. But first, the squirrel rubs the nut on its face. This seemingly nonsensical ritual applies a scent to the nut which helps the squirrel find it later—even under a foot of snow.

In the winter, the average adult squirrel needs to eat about a pound of food a week to maintain an active life. By early spring they have eaten their stockpile of food and often damage landscape plants before there is other food for them to eat. Clipping and feeding on tree buds is a common behavior. Sometimes damage is even more severe. In the spring of 2007, we had many reports of squirrels stripping the bark off maple trees. We've even had reports of squirrels chewing the coating on automobile electrical wires; some of the newer wiring has coating made from soybean meal.

In the late winter, squirrels become more active because this is when the mating season begins. The males will chase females, as well as, chase off other suitors. This ritual of chasing, occurs through the trees at top speed while they perform some of the most breathtaking acrobatics imaginable. In the early spring, the female gives birth to her babies—four or five is an average-sized litter. The

male squirrel plays no part in the rearing process.

Squirrels have truly learned to co-exist with humans and survive well in urban settings. They find natural food, but also take advantage of human handouts. They are active at bird and squirrel feeders. In the summer, they may help themselves to your garden produce. When hungry, they may chew their way into plastic garbage cans for scraps of food.

Cottontail Rabbits

The range of the Eastern cottontail rabbit includes the entire U.S. east of the Rocky Mountains and is found in urban and rural areas in Nebraska. Cottontails in rural areas spend their entire lives on just a few acres, while cottontails in urban areas may not venture far from a single backyard.

Cottontails are vulnerable in the wintertime. To withstand cold temperatures and predation, they find shelter under brush piles, dense shrubs or buildings. They cannot dig, but will hide in cavities dug by other animals. Cottontails are more vulnerable to predators when there is snow on the ground because the grey-brown cottontail does not turn white, like their cousin, the snowshoe hare.

Rabbits have unique digestive systems allowing them to get nourishment when only low nutrient foods are available during winter. Rabbits have a unique, somewhat disgusting, behavior, known as "coprophagy," in which they eat their own feces to gain nutrients that weren't absorbed the first time.

Unlike squirrels, cottontail rabbits do not hide food for the winter. When the ground is covered with snow for long periods, rabbits often severely damage home landscape plants, orchards, forest plantations and park trees and shrubs. Young plants may be clipped off at snow height, but large trees and shrubs may be completely girdled.

If they survive the winter, they eat flowers and vegetables in spring and summer. The most commonly eaten plants are: tulips, pansies, impatiens, hybrid lilies, hostas and asters.

A rabbit's tastes in food can vary considerably, but they do like to eat plants in the rose family. This very large family includes berries (strawberries and raspberries), pome fruits (apples and pears) and stone fruits (plums and peaches). A few ornamentals in this family include potentilla, spirea, crab apple, serviceberry and hawthorne.

Cottontails begin mating as early as February and continue throughout the summer. They are very prolific. The average production is three or four litters a year, with four or five young per litter. In urban settings, dogs and cats are their primary predators.

Exclusion is the most effective method of preventing rabbit damage to trees and shrubs.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

UNL Extension NebGuide G-1526 "Prevention and Control of Rabbit Damage," available at the extension office or online at <http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/epublic/live/g1526/build/g1526.pdf>



Vicki Jedlicka, UNL Extension in Lancaster County

Rabbit damage to young trees. Damage is above ground because rabbits can stand on drifted snow to reach higher bark.

Beginning Beekeeping 2-Day Workshop



presented by UNL Extension Bee Specialist Dr. Marion Ellis

Saturday, Feb. 21, 9 a.m.–5 p.m.
Lancaster Extension Education Center,
444 Cherrycreek Road, Lincoln

You will learn to:

- understand bee biology and behavior to manage bees
- locate hives for best survival and production
- learn about management of honey bee parasites and diseases

Saturday, April 11, 10 a.m.–2 p.m.
Apiculture lab, Agricultural Research and
Development Center (ARDC), near Mead

You will gain hands-on training to give you some experience working with bees. You will:

- open a bee hive
- learn to install packaged bees
- assemble a bee hive
- harvest honey and beeswax
- prepare your crop for market

Registration fee: \$20 per person. Registration includes break refreshments, reference materials and lunch. Cost for each additional family member is \$10 and includes refreshments and lunch (family includes parents and siblings living at home).

Please pre-register by calling 441-7180 or print registration form on the Web at <http://lanaster.unl.edu/pest>

Honey Bees Stressed by Diseases

Bees are needed to pollinate hundreds of flowering fruit, vegetable, seed and nut crops. Apples, blueberries, cantaloupes, cherries, cucumbers, strawberries, raspberries, squash, sunflowers, watermelon and many other crops all rely on bees for pollination.

During the last quarter century, honey bees in the U.S. have been exposed to several introduced diseases and parasites. In addition, beekeepers have lost habitat to urban expansion and high grain prices has driven pasture conversion to row crops that are not attractive to bees.

A rapid increase in the acreage of insect-pollinated crops, especially almonds in California, compounds the problem. With the new orchards coming into produc-

tion in the next four years, almonds alone will require three-fourths of U.S. bee hives. Bringing hives together has the potential to increase transmission of diseases in unaffected colonies.

In 2008, University of Nebraska-Lincoln received \$140,000 as part of a multi-state grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Sixteen different scientists from around the country are looking at stress on bees from several perspectives, including diseases, pests, loss of diversity, exposure to chemicals and nutrition. Scientists studying this problem at UNL include Entomologists, Marion Ellis and Blair Siegfried.

Source: UNL Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resource News.

Squirrels: To Feed or Not to Feed?

Some people enjoy feeding squirrels as much as they enjoy feeding birds. The most common squirrel food includes corn, peanuts (unsalted), birdseed with lots of sunflower seeds, but beware! Many of your neighbors might not be as fond of these tree-climbing rodents as you are. In fact, a National Pest Control Association survey rated the tree squirrel as the number one nuisance animal in America.

Squirrels' teeth grow continuously. Squirrels chew on tree branches to grind down their teeth. They may chew on wood decks, soffits and metal fencing. They can cause fires and communica-

tion outages when they gnaw on electrical, telephone and other cables.

Tree squirrels damage homes when they try to get into attics and roof soffits to nest. They clip the twigs off trees in the spring and can kill trees by stripping bark off trees. In the summer, squirrels steal fruits and vegetables from gardens.

Feeding squirrels will increase their numbers and likelihood of being destructive. In addition, drawing squirrels to a feeder may increase the incidence of mange. Mange is caused by a mite, which is transmitted from squirrel to squirrel. Squirrels also carry fleas.