



THE LIFE OF A RABBIT

Not All (Pregnant Pause) Ears

When it comes to perpetuating the species, rabbits are the Energizer bunnies of the animal world.

The female *Sylvilagus floridanus*, or eastern cottontail that hangs out on Long Island, can start reproducing at the age of three months. She can give birth to three or four litters a year. Consider that each litter contains five or six baby bunnies — newborns are blind, deaf and hairless — and that the female can breed again within hours. One pair of rabbits and their offspring could conceivably conceive 5 million young during a 5-year period.

You don't need Elmer Fudd to keep the bunny brigades in check, however. What with disease, traffic and predators such as foxes, owls and hawks, about 85 percent of the cottontail population dies each year. Even though they can run 25 mph, hop more than 9 feet in the air and run zigzags to evade predators, most rabbits don't usually make it past their second birthday.

But while they're at large, these

voracious vegetarians chow down on succulent grasses, tasty garden vegetables and the tender green shoots of tulips. They graze all night — they're quite the gourmands, with 17,000 taste buds, compared with 10,000 in humans. In winter, they nibble on the twigs, bark and buds of oak, maple, dogwood, sumac and birch trees. Their long incisors grow continuously and they have nearly 360-degree vision, although they can only see shades of gray. Contrary to popular belief, they don't live in warrens. Cottontails — just one of at least 53 species of rabbits in the world — have a home range of five to eight acres and live in slight depressions in the ground or beneath a pile of brush, where they curl up and nap the day away.

Actually, eastern cottontails spend most of their time alone. Baby rabbits stay in a grass- and fur-lined nest with their mother for about four weeks. By then, Mom is pregnant again and they're on their own to raid gardens, dodge predators and perpetuate the species.

— Irene Virag



Newsday Photo / Bill Davis

A pair of rabbits and their offspring could conceive 5 million young in five years.