

NOCTURNAL AGGREGATIONS OF WHITE-TAILED JACK-RABBITS AT RIMBEY, ALBERTA

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The recent series of notes concerning concentrations of White-tailed Jack-rabbits (*Lepus townsendii*) in southern Saskatchewan^{3 4 5} reminded me of similar observations that I made during the winter of 1976-1977 in southern Alberta. The major difference between the Saskatchewan observations and those reported herein is that my observations involve nocturnal activities.

Sightings were made at the northeastern edge of the village of Rimbey, Alberta (51° 39'N, 114° 14'W) about 50 km northwest of Red Deer. This is situated just west of the range of the species as illustrated by Banfield² but others have recorded the hare in this area before.¹ Observations were made during mid to late December 1976 (exact dates not recorded).

For about a 10 day period, large aggregations of jack-rabbits were observed daily in an open fallow field immediately adjacent to urban development. The observations were made from about 2000 hrs. to at least 2300 hrs. The number of animals present varied considerably, from a minimum of 30 to a maximum of 125 - 150. Typically, approximately 100 jack-rabbits were seen on any given night in this period. The hares were relatively evenly distributed over an open area of approximately 300 x 400 m. These estimates were arrived at by traversing the field by automobile. The snow depth was very low at the time (10 cm or less), which favoured vehicular access and apparently encouraged the presence of the animals as well.

Observations were not continued into January 1977 as increased snow depth prohibited vehicular access and hence full coverage of the field. Tracks in the snow suggested, however, that the night-time aggregations continued at least into mid-January.

With limited prior experience of the species (having just moved into the range of the animal), I was not aware at the time that this behaviour was particularly unusual. It seems reasonable to assume that the abundance of food provided sufficient appeal for many of the area's jack-rabbits. I was, nonetheless, surprised by the number of animals involved in these aggregations. These large numbers are even more surprising in light of Banfield's remark that the White-tailed Jack-rabbit "... seems to be one of the least sociable of the [hares]."²

The hares were very actively feeding — unlike those observed by Lahrman in Saskatchewan which spent most of the time sleeping.⁵ Banfield² notes that the species is primarily nocturnal; although my home was adjacent to the "rabbit field", I did not see any hares during day-light hours. The animals were feeding primarily on Alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*) that was commonly exposed throughout the field. This is cited as an important summer food of White-tailed Jack-rabbits², as are twigs, buds and bark in winter. There was no shrubbery at all in the Rimbey site.

Unlike the animals observed by Lahrman⁵, the Rimbey hares were not

wary. They would run to one side to permit the passage of the automobile but rarely moved farther than 20 m away and (after a brief period) would resume feeding. My use of high-beam headlights on the vehicle did not seem to affect the animals differently.

I was unable to observe any sign of conflict — or other social interaction — amongst the hares. Each seemed more intent on feeding than on the presence of observers or other jack-rabbits.

- ¹ACORN, J. 1980. 83A-6 Gull Lake, in D. Spaulding (Editor), *A Nature Guide to Alberta*, Hurtig Publishers, Edmonton.
- ²BANFIELD, A. W. F. 1974. *The Mammals of Canada*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- ³JACKSON, J. W. 1980. More Jack Rabbits. *Blue Jay* 38:267.
- ⁴KREBA, R. 1980. Fearless Jack Rabbits. *Blue Jay* 38:130-131.
- ⁵LAHRMAN, F. W. 1980. A Concentration of White-tailed Jack Rabbits. *Blue Jay* 38:130.

RIVER OTTER SIGHTINGS IN SOUTHERN SASKATCHEWAN

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Two separate sightings of River Otters were made in the prairies of southern Saskatchewan in summer 1980. Glen Suggett observed a single River Otter on August 25 at the north end of Moose Mountain Lake in the southeastern corner of the province. He and Brian Keating observed another on October 4 at the mouth of Swift Current Creek, where it enters the South Saskatchewan River. Otters are easily distinguished from mink, which they resemble in colouration, by their larger size and characteristic loping gait when running on land.

Banfield's *Mammals of Canada* suggests that the River Otter is extirpated in the prairie region of Canada, but otters have been known to travel great distances in search of suitable habitat. The north end of Moose Mountain Lake, where Moose Mountain

Creek enters, and the mouth of Swift Current Creek both provide habitat that fulfills the otter's needs. Moose Mountain Creek, interrupted by several Beaver dams, retained a good supply of water, in spite of the drought experienced last summer. The lake, creek, and adjoining marshlands provided an abundance of amphibians and fish, the mainstays of the otter's diet. Numerous White Pelicans, Double-crested Cormorants, and Great Blue Herons were also observed partaking of this source of protein rich food. Swift Current Creek similarly supplied a healthy population of Leopard Frogs, Minnows and other coarse fish, in addition to an assured supply of water. It lacks the concealment of the emergent vegetation found in Moose Mountain Creek, but it is an isolated spot characterized by steep valley sides, patches of dense brush, and a thin band