

Wildlife Express

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Pygmy Rabbits

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Let's look at Pygmy Rabbits

There is one word that describes the pygmy rabbit better than any other – cute! Pygmy rabbits *Brachylagus* (braka-ee-LAG-us) *idahoensis* (i-dah-o-EN-sis)] could easily be disguised as a plush toy. Their tiny size, big black eyes and short rounded ears just make a person want to cuddle them. Please don't! You might get scratched!

As you probably figured out by the name, pygmy rabbits are small. They are the smallest rabbits, not just in Idaho, but in the whole world! They are less than one foot long and weigh less than one pound.

In Idaho, pygmy rabbits are found in the southern and east-central parts of the state.

You can tell pygmy rabbits apart from other rabbits in Idaho, but you must look carefully. Unlike their cousins the cottontail, pygmy rabbits don't have the white puffball of fur on the underside of their tails. Pygmy rabbits also have rounder ears and rust-colored fur on their legs and back of their necks.

Pygmy rabbits are crepuscular (kra-PUH-skewler), which means they are out mostly at dawn and dusk.

One thing pygmy rabbits must have in their habitat is sagebrush. Big, bushy, tall sagebrush is best. Sagebrush offers pygmy rabbits cover (shelter) and food. It is about the only thing pygmy rabbits eat during the winter. Grasses and wild flowers are eaten in the spring and summer.

The sagebrush needs to be growing in deep, loose soil, because pygmy rabbits make their own burrows to live in. Burrows usually have

Cottontail Rabbit



The little rabbits are helpless when born. They need to stay hidden as much as possible. Many animals eat pygmy rabbits. Both adults and young are in danger of being eaten by many hungry animals including weasels, coyotes, badgers, owls, hawks and foxes. The first five weeks of a pygmy rabbit's life are the most dangerous.

Besides the protection of their burrows, the color of their fur helps it to avoid predators. Colors of brown and gray help them to blend into the ground and sagebrush. They also are capable of short bursts of speed to try to escape a predator. Be quick, little bunny!

Predators are not even the biggest problem for pygmy rabbits, though - loss of sagebrush is. Remember that pygmy rabbits depend on it for both food and shelter.

To learn more about the importance of sagebrush in Idaho, read on.

two or more entrances. Entrances are hidden near the bottom of the sagebrush plant.

It turns out that pygmy rabbits build a whole network of tunnels for their safety. Underground, the burrows lead to connected rooms. Above ground, pygmy rabbits use a system of runways between sagebrush plants. They move by scampering close to the ground. Leaping and moving quickly would attract the attention of a predator much too easily.


During the winter, pygmy rabbits make burrows under the snow. These burrows allow them to hide under the snow while getting food, and they don't have to go out in the cold winter air.

Spring and early summer are breeding season for the pygmy rabbit. The females dig special dens and line them with fur and grass to have their young. As many as six bunnies are born in a litter, and females may have up to three litters per season!

Pygmy Rabbit



What is sagebrush?



Sagebrush is one of the most important plants in Idaho's desert environment. This woody shrub provides food and/or cover for many desert animals year-round. Some sagebrush species grow three to four feet tall but can be up to 10 feet tall. You may be surprised to learn that there are 37 species of sagebrush found in the Gem State!

In late summer or early fall, small golden yellow flowers bloom on the sagebrush plant, but you have to look closely to see them. You can tell sagebrush by its smell. It has a sweet, strong odor, especially after rain.

Sagebrush has adapted very well to the harsh conditions where it lives. It has narrow leaves that are covered with tiny hairs. This helps to protect the plant from drying out both in the heat and in the cold of winter. The root system of sagebrush is also unique. It has developed so that it can water itself. At night, the tap root of sagebrush pulls moisture from deep in the soil to shallow branching roots that grow near the surface.

During the day, the shallow roots use this water to keep the shrub alive. If you've ever walked near sagebrush, you might think the gnarly (NAR-ly) looking plant is tough. The fact is, sagebrush is very fragile. It does not grow back easily after disturbances. Wildfires pose a huge threat to sagebrush. It takes many years, even decades, for sagebrush to fully grow back.

For a pygmy rabbit, sagebrush is nearly its entire food source in the winter and in

the summer, it is about 50%. Sagebrush is important for many other animals, as well.

Animals that are highly dependent on sagebrush are called sagebrush-obligate species. Sagebrush-obligate species only live in sagebrush habitat. In Idaho we have many sagebrush obligate species including sage brush lizard, pronghorn, grouse (sharp-tailed and greater sage), sage thrasher and sage sparrow.

Native Americans used sagebrush for many things, too. The wood was burned for fuel or used to build dwellings, or places to live. The leaves contain camphor, which was used for coughs, colds, headaches, fever and to relieve most any kind of pain. The leaves and seeds of sagebrush were also eaten.

We should consider ourselves lucky to have such a plant and the diverse species that depend on it in Idaho. If measures aren't taken to protect it, we will lose more than the plant.



sagebrush leaves

Food Chains

Have you ever heard the saying, “One thing leads to another?” This sure is true with food chains. Food chains are formed when one animal eats a plant and then another animal eats it. Each plant or animal is one link in the chain.

At each link, energy is passed from one link to the next. Some links are easy to see. Almost all food chains start with the sun. Plants, like sagebrush, use the energy from the sun to make the sugar and food needed to grow. A pygmy rabbit eats the sagebrush and uses the energy stored in the leaf. A bobcat may then eat the pygmy rabbit, and the energy in the rabbit is passed to the bobcat.

Sun links to sagebrush, which links to pygmy rabbit, which links to bobcat

Sometimes things other than just energy and nutrients pass from one animal to the next in a food chain. Chemicals used to kill certain plants



Barn Owl

have been found in birds of prey. How did the poison get into their bodies when they didn't eat the plants the poison was sprayed on? The answer can be found by following the links in the food chain. Mice had swallowed the poison when eating plants. The poison does not leave the mouse's body. It is stored in their body fat. When the bird of prey ate the mouse, they also ate the poison that was in the mouse.

Food chains can teach people how their actions not only affect the plants or animals they want to get rid of, but also animals they do not want to harm, including ourselves.



Bobcat

Food Webs

Food webs are made up of food chains that are linked together. If you could draw one out, a food web might look a bit like a spider web. Food webs help show us how plants and animals are connected in nature.

No matter how different and separate plants and animals may seem, their food chains connect them in some way. Would you think that a salamander would be connected to a wolf? It may be hard to see this connection, but it is there.

Here are the food chains that connect salamanders to wolves. Wolves eat moose, and

moose eat cattails. Salamanders eat aquatic insects, and the insects eat moss growing on cattails. Salamanders and wolves are connected in the food web by cattails. If the cattails around a pond are removed, both the wolves and salamanders might be affected, along with every other animal in the food web.

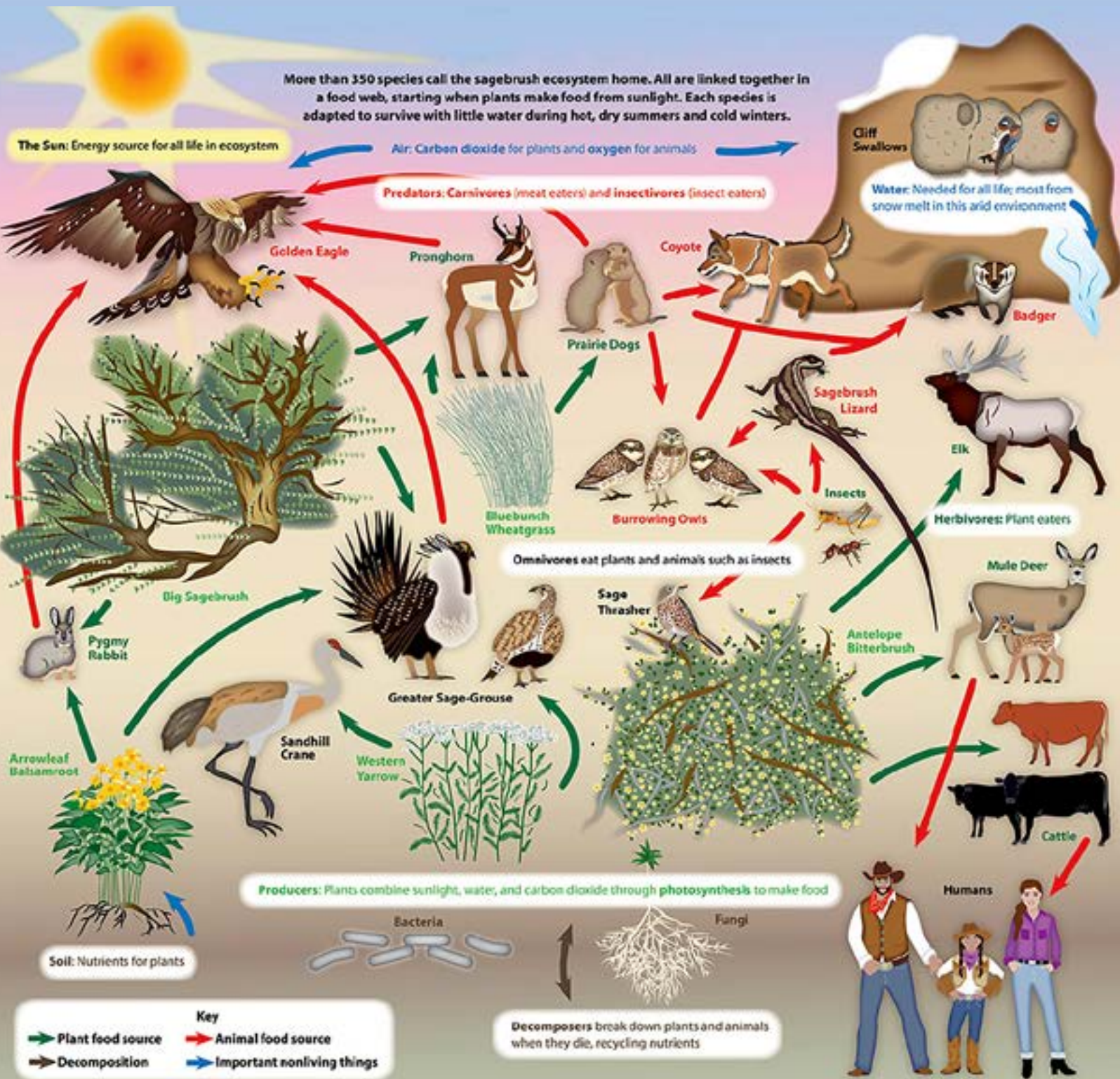
Everything in nature is connected in some way. Food webs help us see those connections in nature.

Do you think you might be connected to a pygmy rabbit in some way? Think of different food chains and webs to see if you can find a connection.

Pygmy Rabbit: CC-BY Bob Bales at Flickr Creative Commons



Web of Life





Spring has Sprung!

The days are getting longer. The weather is getting warmer, and there is excitement in the air. That can only mean one thing – it's spring! If you watch and listen carefully, you may see that animals are aware that it's spring, too.

What kinds of things are happening with wildlife in the spring?

It is a busy time for them. Animals all around are looking for mates and places to have their young. Skunks and foxes are searching for dens. Birds are establishing territories and building new nests. Great horned owls, which start to lay eggs in February, may already have chicks learning to fly.

The hardships of winter are over for many animals. Deer and elk are heading for higher ground where new, nutritious food is now available.

Another sign telling us that warm weather is ahead is the molting of animals' coats. Elk and deer shed their winter coats and grow new lighter coats. Big clumps of hair can also

be found hanging off a mountain goat's coat. Animals, such as the weasel that grew a special white coat to blend in with the snow, must replace it with their brown summertime coat.

Hungry bear cubs, weighing only three to four pounds, are coming out of their dens with their mothers. Romping and playing are only part of what they do. At other times, their mothers are teaching them how to find food and to survive on their own.

The sun's warmth and longer days also brings about the beginning of another year in the lifecycle of amphibians and reptiles. Having spent the winter in an underground hideaway, these animals need to find places in the sun to bask. The sun's warmth helps them to raise their body temperatures.

In the springtime, songbirds brighten our lives with flashes of color and beautiful song; they announce the coming of spring after winter.

Look and listen. What signs of spring are near you?

Helping Ecosystems, Helping Wildlife

As people settled the west, they altered the land. Some sagebrush was cleared to make fields. People also brought with them a weed called cheatgrass. The seeds cling to the fur of animals and the tires of vehicles. Cheatgrass spreads quickly and grows better and faster than sagebrush after a fire. It also burns easily. With fires occurring more often than normal, sagebrush doesn't have a chance to recover. Now, cheatgrass is found in many places where sagebrush once grew. This means pygmy rabbits must search out a new patch of sagebrush. It is a difficult search for them.

For this reason, pygmy rabbits have been considered a species that may need to be on the endangered species list. Early in the 2000's studies were done to see if pygmy rabbits should have endangered species protection. Scientists found that the listing was not warranted. This is because agencies like Idaho Department of Fish and Game showed that the species was stable. Twenty years later (2023) studies were set up to test the need once again. Surveys were designed to document where pygmy rabbits lived in Idaho. Fortunately,

through scientific studies, it was found that pygmy rabbit populations were maintaining enough to not be considered endangered.

The tiny rabbits are considered a *Species of Greatest Conservation Need* (SGCN) in Idaho. SGCN are species known to be experiencing declines or are at risk due to various stressors and issues, which is why Idaho Fish and Game is continuing to monitor.

Protecting pygmy rabbits' habitat "islands" is the best way to help them. This means protecting and restoring sagebrush. Controlling cheatgrass, is very important. People are looking at ways to reduce the spread of weeds and keep them out of healthy stands of sagebrush. Planting the seeds of native shrubs and plants after a fire will help.

It is also important to protect the sagebrush "bridges" that allow pygmy rabbits to move to new habitats.

Everyone needs to work together to protect and restore sagebrush habitat. Protecting fragile ecosystems will help not only the pygmy rabbit, but other wildlife species, as well.

Sagebrush: CC-BY Lynn Kinter at IDFG



Let Them Be



Spring is a time for renewal. Please get out and *“Notice Nature!”*

It’s warming up outside. Plants are blooming and for many wild animals it’s time to raise young. Remember, it is especially important that we leave animals alone at this vulnerable time for them. Give room for them to do the things they need to do to survive. Getting too close to wild animals might stress them and cause problems for them.

As humans, we have an urge to take care of things we think are helpless, especially cute little animals, like pygmy rabbits. If you see a baby animal, don’t assume it has been abandoned by its mother. Most of the time, this isn’t the case. Mothers often leave their young hidden while

they go away to eat. If the mother stayed close to her baby, she could draw the attention of a predator. Or, you may have scared the mother away. She will return once “danger” has passed.

If you know that an animal is orphaned because the mother has died, call your local Fish and Game office.

Chances are if you take an animal home, it will die. Caring for a wild animal is not the same as caring for a pet. They need special food, cages, and treatments. Wildlife rehabilitators are specially trained and licensed to care for them. Wildlife should not be handled, fed, chased, or disturbed. If an animal allows you get close enough to pick it up, it may be sick. Do not pick up a wild animal – dead or alive.

Wild animals are just that – wild! Mostly, they survive on their own just fine without our help.

Wild animals are unique and wonderful, view them from a distance and leave wildlife in the wild.

Pygmy Rabbit Wordsearch



Words

burrows
rounded

camouflage
sagebrush

colony
smallest

ecosystems
webs

less
wildlife

Pygmy rabbits' colors help them to

_____.

The most important thing in a pygmy rabbit's habitat is

_____.

Pygmy rabbits are the _____ rabbits in Idaho.

Food _____ can help people see how everything in nature is connected.

Pygmy rabbits have short, _____ ears.

There is _____ sagebrush in Idaho, then there once was.

Pygmy rabbits dig large _____.

Helping _____ helps wildlife.

A group of rabbits is called a

_____.

It's best to leave _____ in the wild.



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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express, it may be included in a future issue!

Send it to: lori.wilson@idfg.idaho.gov

or

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