

## Living With Wildlife- Rabbits and Hares

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Two species which are sometimes confused for one another are the Eastern Cottontail rabbit (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) and the Snowshoe Hare (*Lepus americanus*). Both are members of the family Leporidae, and both are found in the Ottawa area.

At first glance the physical appearance of rabbits and hares are similar, although a closer look will reveal some key differences. Rabbits have smaller hind feet and ears. In the winter the hares' fur changes from brown to white. Hares tend to be found in more wooded or naturalized areas while rabbits tend to be found more in cultivated landscapes, urban settings and in edge habitats.

People are often surprised to find a nest of baby rabbits in the middle of their backyard. They can be very well camouflaged in a small nest that is covered with grass and some of mom's fur. You can look right at the nest and not see it. The common reaction is to be worried since no adult rabbit has been seen, but this is normal as mom only visits to nurse the babies 1 –2 times in a 24 hour period. It is safer for the babies to be on their own the rest of the time as mom would attract the attention of predators.

If you find a nest of baby rabbits, the best thing to do is leave them alone. If you have pets you can keep them from the area for a few weeks, to give the fast growing rabbits a chance to grow and disperse.

Another key difference between rabbits and hares is found in their offspring. When born, baby hares are more advanced in their development than rabbits, they are fully furred, have their eyes open and are alert. Within a week, young hares separate and leave the nest to forage for food.

When rabbits are born they are naked and have their eyes closed, and are not furred until they are four weeks old. So a 4 week old rabbit will look like a newborn hare. A good indication if a baby is a hare or rabbit is the fur. Young hares look quite fluffy, almost as if their fur has been blown dry. The fur of baby rabbits is more slick to its body.

If you find a baby and there is no obvious problem, such as an injury or it is stuck in a window well, it is best to leave it alone.

In the meantime, remember this is the height of the birthing season for wildlife. Do not take any action before first checking [www.wildlifeinfo.ca](http://www.wildlifeinfo.ca) for effective advice.