

Pygmy rabbits in Washington State

An activity book about the biology and environment of the
Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit.

By Elizabeth Jackson, Foster Creek Conservation District & Oregon State University

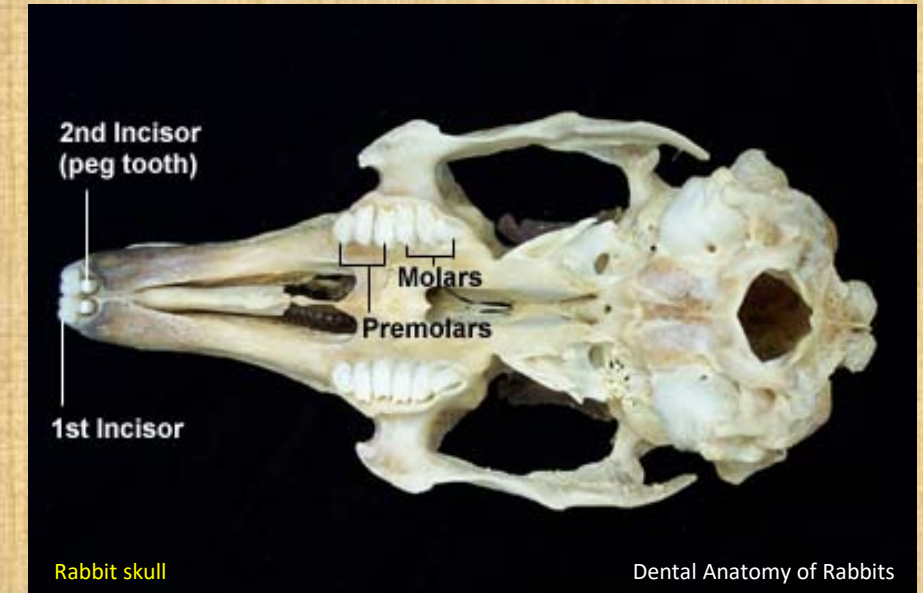


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How to define the word “rabbit”?

- Many believe that rabbits are rodents, however, this is not the case. Rabbits, hares, and pikas are considered Lagomorphs, meaning “hare-shaped”.
- Lagomorphs have two pairs of upper incisors, or teeth used for gnawing, while rodents only have one pair.
- Rabbits and hares are different too.
Let’s take a look at some of the differences...
 - **Hares** are physically larger and more independent. They build their nests in the grass aboveground and are born **precocial**, or covered in fur with eyes open. Hares can begin hopping around soon after being born – incredible!
 - **Rabbits**, on the other hand, are smaller and more social. They build their nests underground and are born **altricial**, or hairless and blind, like a kitten. Rabbit kits require a lot of parental care.

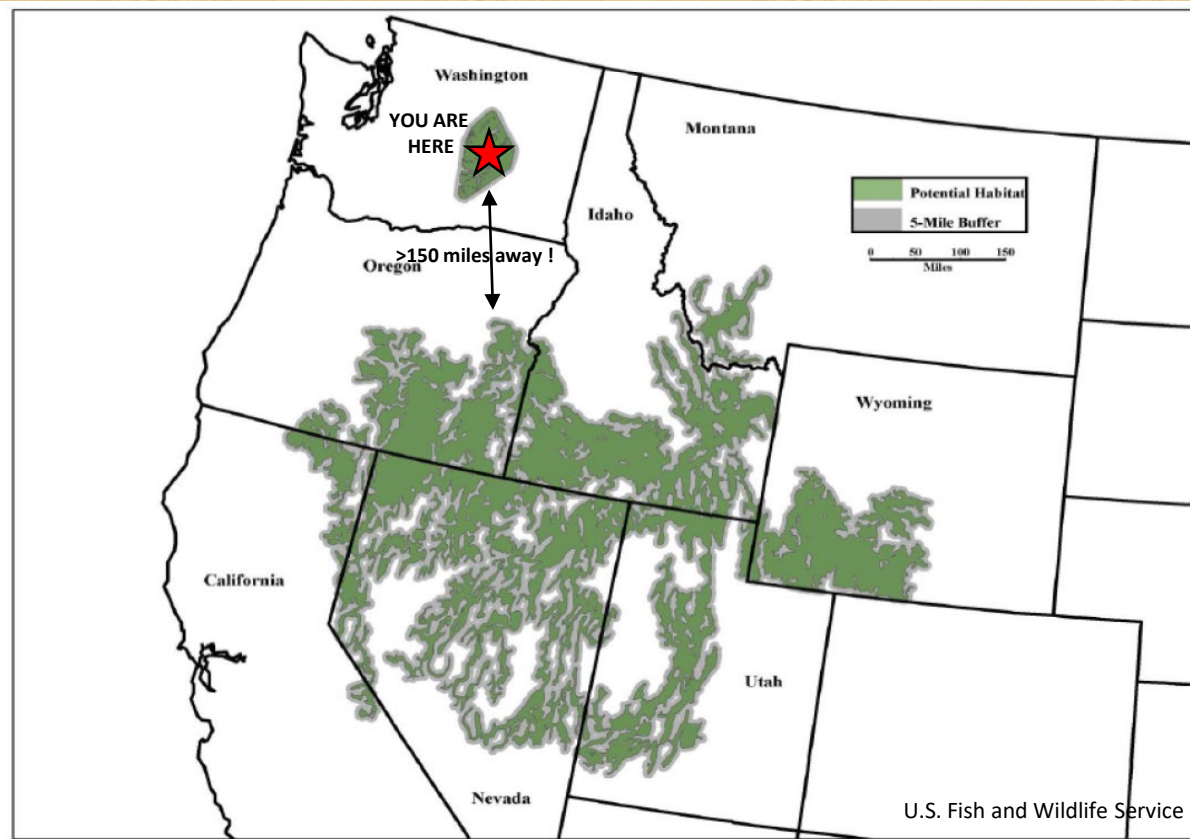


What is a pygmy rabbit?



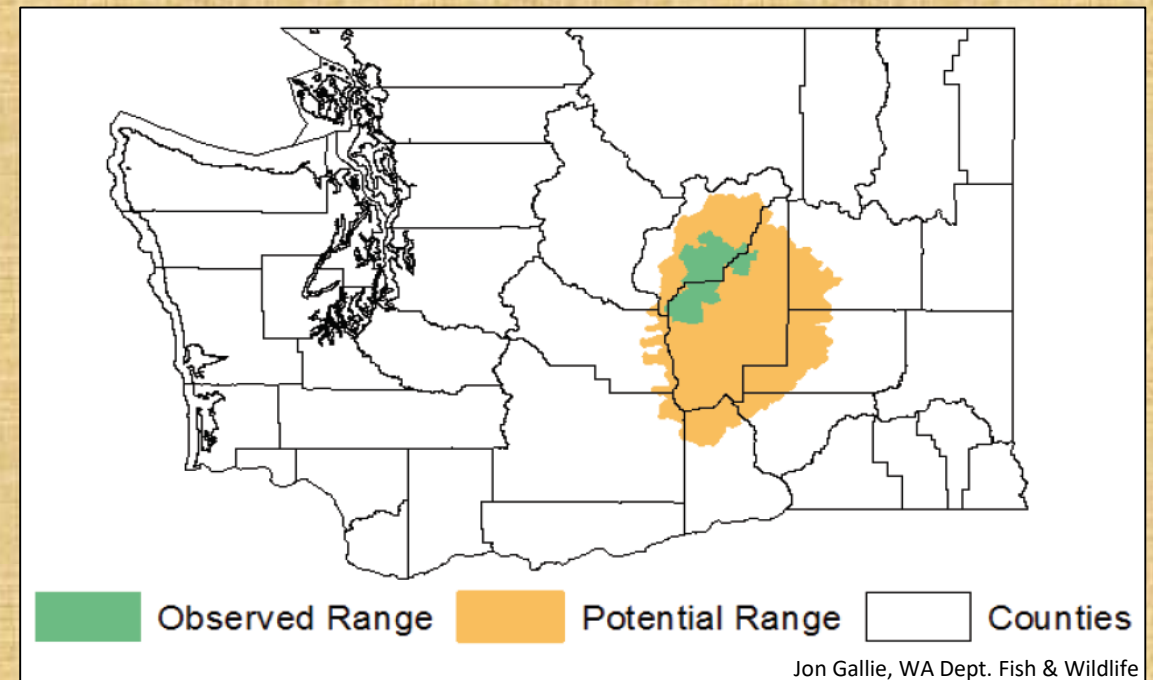
- The term “pygmy” can refer to species that are smaller than most of that same type of animal.
- These rabbits are unique herbivores because they eat sagebrush which is toxic to most wildlife, such as deer, elk, and mice.
- They are easily confused for cottontail rabbits which have a bright, white tail. Pygmy rabbits do not have a white tail or belly, theirs are brown.
- They are only one of two rabbits in North America that dig their own burrows. The other is the volcano rabbit that lives in Mexico.
- Baby rabbits are called kits. Young rabbits are called juveniles and “children” rabbits are called offspring.
- Each female produces an average of 3 litters per year and average 6 kits per litter.
- Their average lifespan is short averaging only 2 – 3 years in the wild and 3 – 5 years in captivity.

Where can I find a pygmy rabbit?



The Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit is a distinct population. These rabbits are hundreds of miles away from other populations of pygmies.

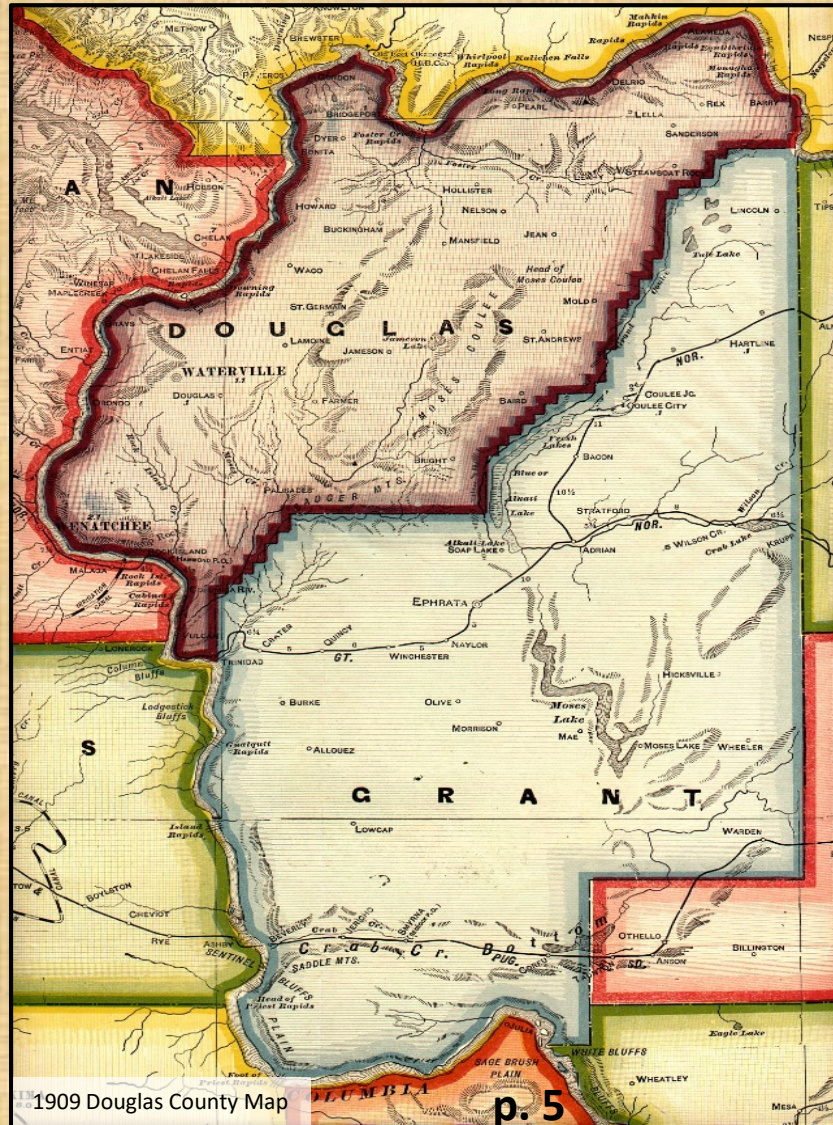
The expansion of human development and agriculture, such as orchards and cropland, have replaced the rabbit's habitat, leaving them without a safe place to live. Sagebrush Flat was the last population of rabbits before the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife began recovery efforts to increase the number of pygmy rabbits in 2002.



Where can I find a pygmy rabbit?

Less than 100 years ago, Washington's pygmy rabbits were found throughout six counties.

Today, they are only found in Douglas and Grant Counties.



How to identify a pygmy rabbit...

- You will not find pygmy rabbits running under houses, sheds, or other human-made structures. They are secretive and do not like human disturbances, such as roads and residential areas.
- These rabbits dig their burrows in deep, loamy soils. This deep soil allows for their tunnels to go two to three feet underground.
- Incredibly, these rabbits absorb water from the plants they eat. They can be found in areas without water and can go their entire life without ever taking a drink.
- Rabbits do not hibernate – in fact, they are active all year long, especially during dawn and dusk.
- Pygmy rabbit tracks are easiest to find in the winter because the snow shows their footprints. This makes surveying for them much easier for wildlife biologists!

Predators

Coyotes, badgers, long-tailed weasels, owls, harriers, and hawks are common predators of the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit.

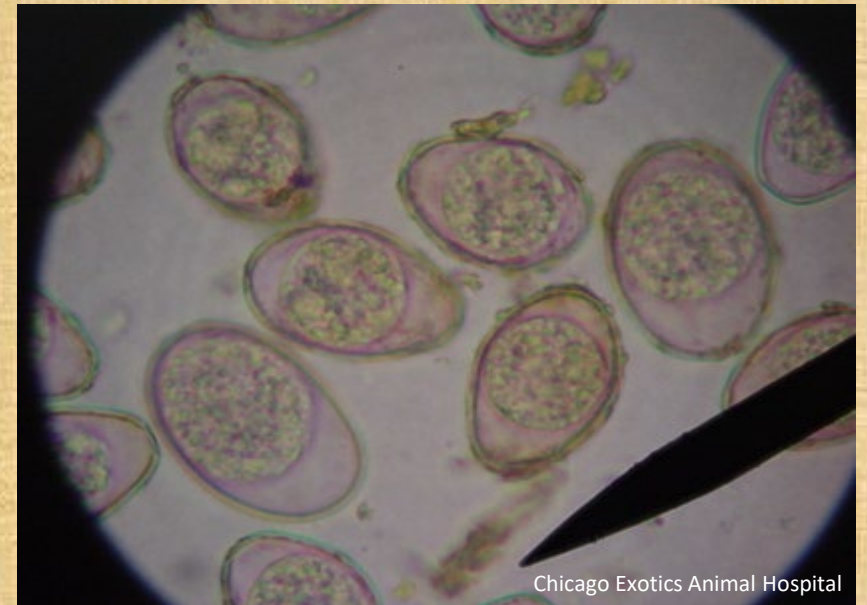


Other threats to rabbits

- Wildfire is major risk to pygmy rabbits. Fires can destroy the rabbit's sagebrush habitat, leaving them without food or shelter for years.



- Disease is another serious threat to the pygmy rabbit. Efforts to increase the number of wild rabbits will reduce the risk of disease.

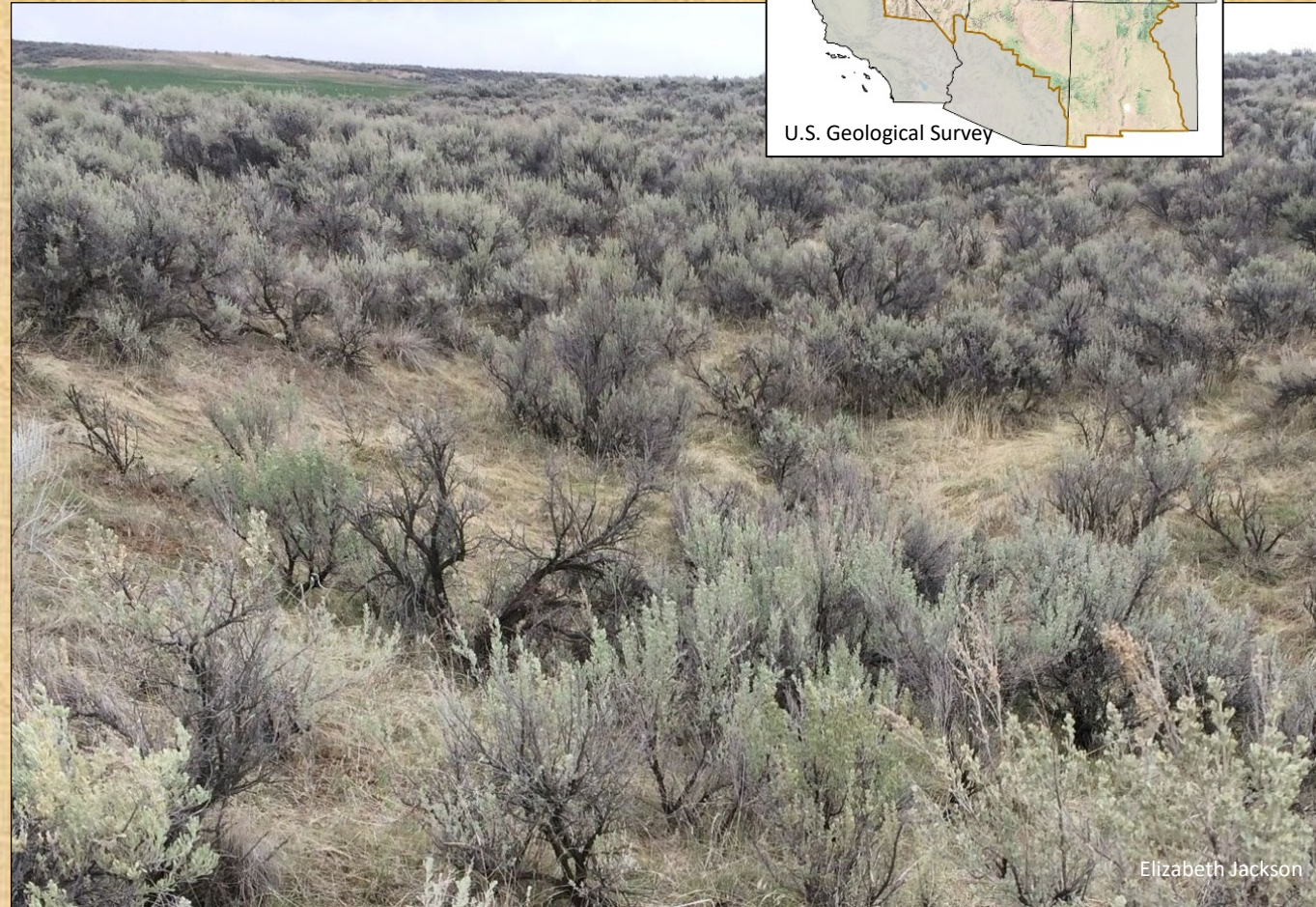


Single-celled **coccidia** under a microscope.

Coccidiosis is a soil-borne, parasitic disease that can be fatal to rabbits.

The Sagebrush Sea

- Home to important wildlife, such as rabbits, grouse, pronghorn, burrowing owls, and much more.
- Unique habitat full of shrubs, grasses, and forbs (flowers). All of which pygmy rabbits will eat.
- The sagebrush shrub-steppe is found throughout the Western United States from the Canada to Mexico borders in an area referred to as the Intermountain West.
- Arid (dry) land that receive little rainfall per year.

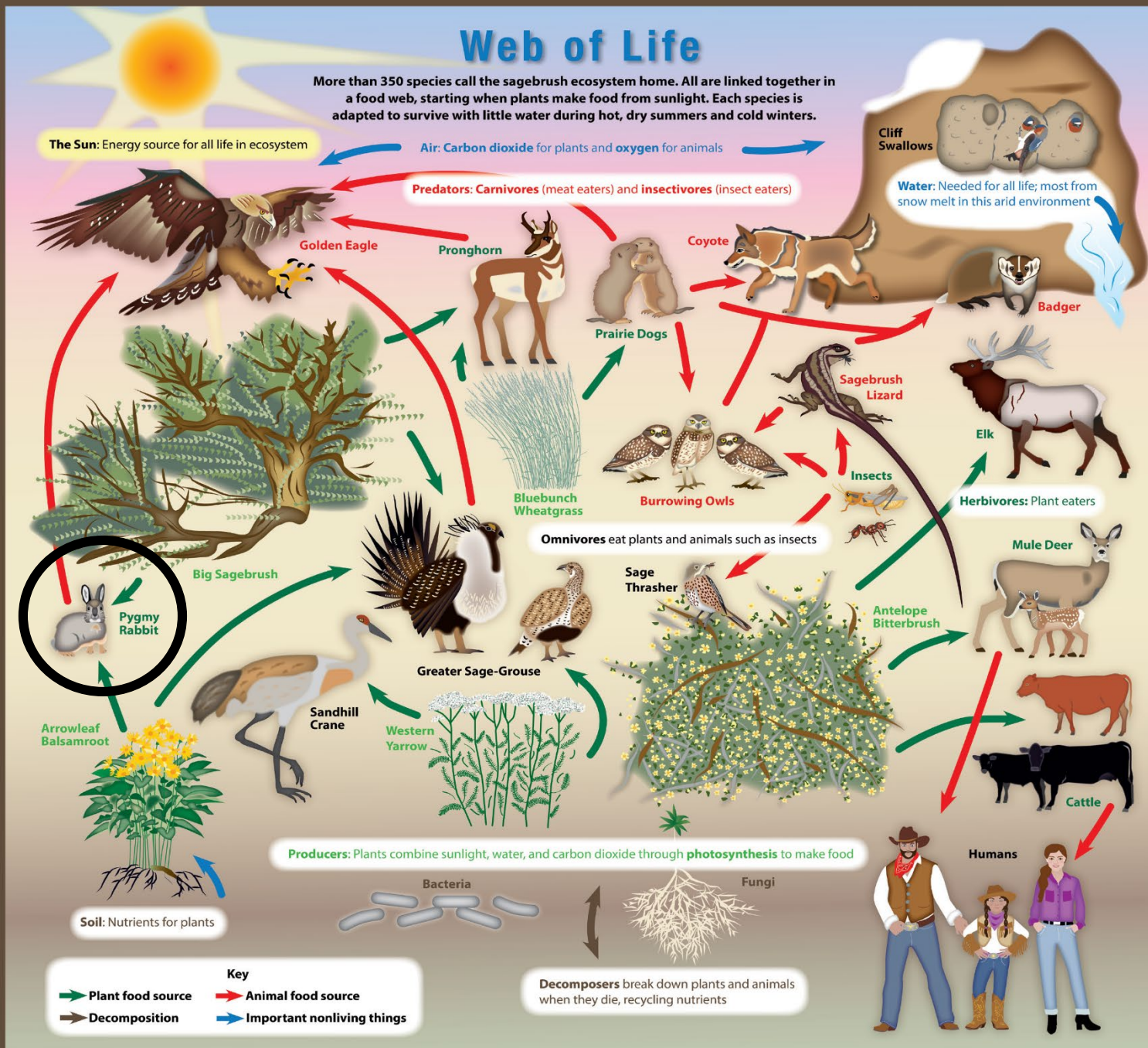


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SAGEBRUSH ECOSYSTEMS



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Created by Rick Reynolds
(EngagingPress.com)
and Fran Lee (Fran-Lee.com)
in collaboration with USFWS,
Audubon Rockies, BLM,
and other partners.



Pygmy rabbits are herbivores and a primary consumer. As such, they are lower in the food chain, acting as an important prey species for omnivores, such as badgers, and carnivores, such as coyotes and owls.

How you can help pygmy rabbits!

- Get outdoors and enjoy nature!
 - Visit Sun Lakes – Dry Falls State Park, Moses Coulee, Ancient Lakes, or another nature preserve to get up close and experience the sagebrush shrub-steppe.
- Realize that you are lucky to live in beautiful Washington State!
 - Central Washington, in particular, is home to a unique environment full of wonder and wildlife. Be proud!
- Learn science and volunteer!
 - Science is all around us, everyday. It has many topics and could be the path to your future career. Volunteering at an organization that interests you will increase your skills and knowledge for the future.



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Break the Code

Use the key below to decipher the hidden message.

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14

O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z
15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26

16 25 7 13 25 18 1 2 2 9 20 19

12 15 22 5 20 15 5 1 20

19 1 7 5 2 18 21 19 8

5 22 5 18 25 4 1 25



Pygmy Rabbit Word Search

Search for the important words that describe pygmy rabbits and their habitat. Words can be found forwards, backwards, up, down, or diagonal.

J D Z
M J A B T O T H K
M R F U R B T I B B A R E
C I I X K Z S A V O A S D F H W O
E Q C A R L Y L W L V L R Z E A X A E
K X A D W E K X D L A U O P A K R K U M X
H A I T P I T I K D M C N Z S U A E S Z L
H W B G S C M E O E Q M R A S F W G J G C X T
L I X A R R U Y Q Y X A I Q V L D T S G N G G
F O L H E C I E R U Z O M D I C M O Q R B T A D P
A B D I K T Y C C T R Z C I N Y Q C E D E H R D B
T L N P L P N A U O K E A G B M O P O U D P C F N
O E N H H Z K C Z L L V E W V I N Y R P A N J X O D E
P I H S R E N T R A P T E J J S G K N N B P L C L L S
W N G O E L I P N L Q F U R E M D O I Z S B O R V B E
J S A G E B R U S H X W R Y U T F W U K M N L A D
U V J W M Y P Q S I L V I E G Q R H E C I R D E G
U E R M J S V T P Q A C K N H G Q L R Z J G N U E
A R I L L P U P T V L I Q R J K B O U E F Z W
D N L U Q I W I Q J H H T E E W Z V R R A J X
K B B V I O V H S R R A D H A B I T A T Y
O J I N N R S A Y X D E X N H T B M H B B
J N W Z R W O N R K G H U I K R A R A
U G L U G D H E B I S H I W E P E
Y B S Y Y Q U L Q G D M H
B U L B N R V N S
H E I

AGRICULTURE
CONSERVATION
ENDANGERED
HERBIVORE
PARTNERSHIP
RECOVERY
WASHINGTON

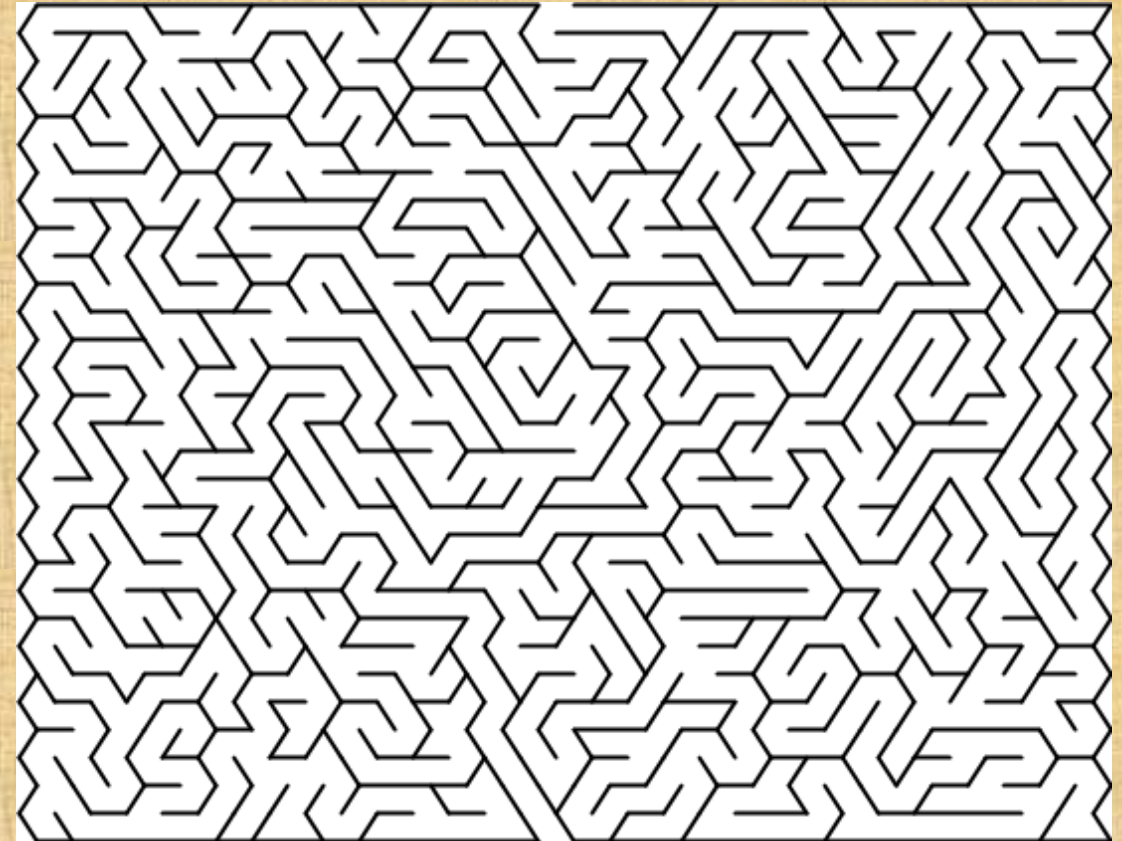
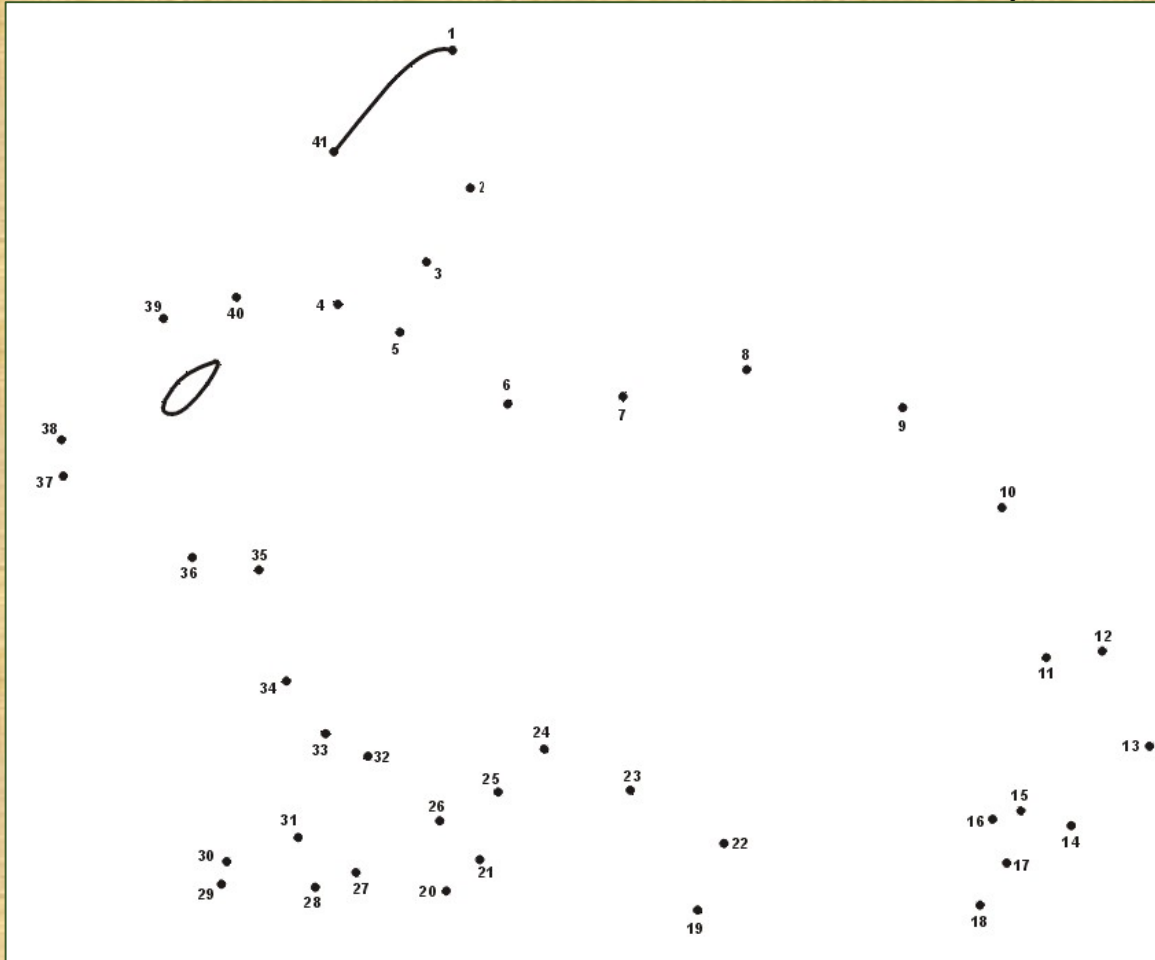
BADGER
COYOTE
HABITAT
KIT
PYGMY
SAGEBRUSH
WILD

BURROW
DIG
HAWK
MAMMAL
RABBIT
SOIL

Help the pygmy rabbit find its way back to the burrow before the great-horned owl catches it!



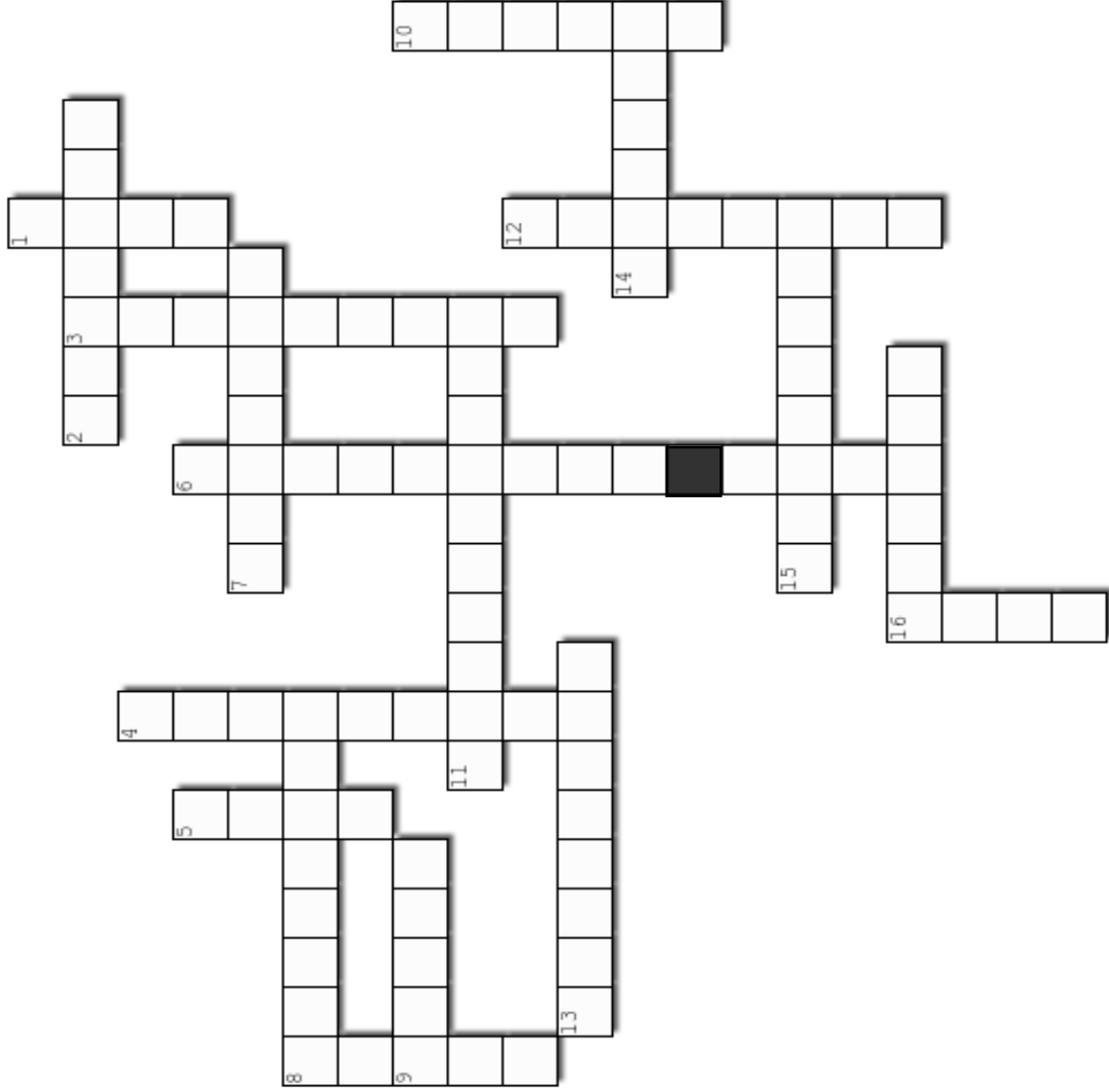
Connect the Dots below to reveal a new picture



Name: _____

Crossword Puzzle

Test your new knowledge about the pygmy rabbit by filling in this crossword puzzle. All of the answers to the puzzle are underlined somewhere in this packet.



Created using the Crossword Maker on TheTeachersCorner.net

Across

2. _____ has been found to decrease pygmy rabbit numbers. Luckily, veterinarians have medication for it.
7. In the spring and summer, pygmy rabbits will eat sagebrush, _____, and flowers.
8. The Washington Department of Fish and _____ is leading the efforts to recover pygmy rabbit populations.
9. The pygmy rabbit's favorite food is _____ to many other mammals, including humans.
11. Contrary to popular belief, rabbits are not rodents. Instead, they are considered in the order _____.
13. Rabbits are herbivores, or they only eat plants, so they are considered a primary _____ in the food chain.
14. The _____ is a dog-like predator of the pygmy rabbit.
15. Washington State pygmy rabbits are known as _____ Basin pygmy rabbits.
16. _____ is the best season to look for rabbits because their tracks are very visible in the snow.

Down

1. A bright, white _____ belongs to a cottontail rabbit because a pygmy rabbit's is brown.
3. _____ is the pygmy rabbit's favorite food.
4. Pygmy rabbits are active and eat year-round, therefore, they do not _____ like some other mammals such as bears.
5. Rabbits enjoy digging their burrows in deep _____ because the tunnels can reach farther underground.
6. The last population of pygmy rabbits in Washington was found at _____.
8. Pygmy rabbits consume _____ from the vegetation they eat – this is why they are found in areas without ponds or streams.
10. The _____ is a main predator of the pygmy rabbit whose "messy" burrows can be confused for a rabbit's.
12. The conversion of sagebrush habitat into _____ is one of the reasons that there are less pygmy rabbits today.
16. The average lifespan of a _____ pygmy rabbit is 2 – 3 years.

Did you know that up until the 18th century, rabbits were called "coney?"



If you think you have seen a Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit or if you would like to learn more about them, please visit the following websites or contact your local wildlife office:

- 1) Washington Department of Fish, (509) 754 – 5257
<https://wdfw.wa.gov/species-habitats/species/brachylagus-idahoensis#conservation>
- 2) U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, (509) 665 – 3508
<https://www.fws.gov/sagebrush/wildlife/pygmy-rabbit/>
- 3) Foster Creek Conservation District, (509) 888 – 6372

