

A CLOSER LOOK

By Ron Wilson



CRAIG BHIRLE

White-tailed Jackrabbit

Dressing for Winter

At least in some cases, the rule about not wearing white after Labor Day doesn't apply on the Northern Plains.

As daylight hours shorten in fall, North Dakota's two hares and three weasel species gradually replace coats more suitable to summer surroundings with fur as white as the coming winter snows.

This transformation for both the hares – white-tailed jackrabbit and snowshoe hare – and weasels – long-tailed, short-tailed and least weasel – is one of survival.

By turning white, hares are better camouflaged from predators when snow dominates the landscape, as is the case this winter. For weasels, white coats aid in their concealment while hunting prey, plus it helps mask their whereabouts from larger enemies such as raptors, coyotes and badgers.

Cold temperatures and snow cover have nothing to do with this type of transformation found in so few animals

in North Dakota. In the weasel's case, for instance, scientists tell us it results from a change in the amount of available light, or photoperiod. As daylight hours shorten in fall, the reduction in light entering the weasel's eye stimulates the pituitary gland to shut off production of color pigment for the winter coat being molted. So, instead of replacing its brown fur, it grows in white.

In the case of the white-tailed jackrabbit and snowshoe hare, the conversion from summer to winter wear lasts about 10 weeks, with white coloring first appearing on the ears and feet and moving to the body. In spring, this winter coat is replaced by brown fur in a reverse process.

The white-tailed jackrabbit is a prairie hare and is found in wide open grasslands throughout North Dakota. Snowshoe hares seldom leave wooded areas and are found primarily in the Turtle and Killdeer mountains and Pembina Hills.

(Note: You should know this about the white-tailed jackrabbit. It's not really a rabbit, but a hare, according to biologists. The main difference is that baby hares are born furred, with their eyes open and are active shortly after birth. Rabbits, such as cottontail rabbits, however, are born hairless, blind and helpless.)

Weasels live in grasslands and bushy areas, and are often found near rivers, streams and wetlands. They seldom dig dens, preferring to modify the burrows of other animals.

Despite the neat adjustment of hares and weasels to turn white in winter, neither lives that long on average – maybe a year or two. When you're the focus of bigger, stronger and faster predators, sometimes it's a struggle to outlast winter's snow.

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