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RAISE SNOWSHOE RABBITS IN CAPTIVITY IN MAINE

Wild snowshoe rabbits may be romping around in pens in your backyard one of these days if experiments at the Maine Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit in Orono continue to be as successful as they have been during the past year. According to a recent report received by the Fish and Wildlife Service, United States Department of the Interior, the unit has kept wild, live-trapped snowshoe hares in good health and vigor by feeding them a commercial rabbit food mixture.

These wild rabbits will breed successfully under penned conditions, according to Joye Saveraid, a graduate student of the unit who conducted the experiment. The unit is financially sponsored by the University of Maine, the Maine Inland Fish and Game Commission, the American Wildlife Institute, and the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Apparently prolific, female snowshoe hares will mate again on the same day they drop a litter. Saveraid, who kept detailed records of each rabbit in the wired pens constructed on a wooded plot near the University of Maine, also reported that nine females mated for a third time during the same season. It is quite likely, he said, that some will mate for a fourth time.

The number of matings apparently has no effect on the number of young. Saveraid found that both the first and the second litters averaged 2.7 young. No report was made on the number of young in the third litters.

From observations at the pens, it is believed that the height of the first breeding season occurs during the last week in March and the first week in April.

Must Reduce Mortality

Enterprising game-animal breeders are discouraged against starting snowshoe rabbit farms, however, because the penned animals had a high mortality rate. Of 36 young born in 1939, only 2 are still alive. Sixteen young (43 percent) were killed by the mothers, 4 (10 percent) escaped, 4 (10 percent) were stolen by young boys, 2 starved, and the remainder died of other causes.

In 1940, working under the same conditions, Saveraid saved 5 of 67 young born. Of the 62 that died, 23 (24 percent) disappeared, 8 (12 percent) drowned, 7 (10 percent) were killed by the mothers, 5 (7.5 percent) were killed by weasels, and the remainder died from other causes.

Adults, too, suffered heavy losses. Of 121 adult snowshoe hares live-trapped and placed in pens, 37 are still alive. The following factors were responsible for most of the losses: So-called shock disease, 38 (31.5 percent); predatory animals, 27 (22.4 percent); escaped, 11 (9 percent); and other causes, 2 (1.6 percent).

Observers are of the opinion that the mortality rate can be reduced by building vermin-proof pens on high, dry ground. Such pens are now under construction at the Maine unit. Mated females will be placed in these pens before the young are born, but the young will be separated from the mothers as soon as the weaning stage is over.

Animals of the North Woods

The snowshoe rabbit is also known as the varying hare and white rabbit. It belongs to a small group of closely related species and geographic races of hares

peculiar to northern North America. Usually these animals live in cool forested regions, along low growing bushes near swamps and along streams.

The name varying hare or snowshoe rabbit comes from two characteristics that aid the animal to live in the northland. In summer, the rabbit has a dusky or brownish fur but in fall it begins to turn to a white winter coat. The exact time of the change depends upon the season. In spring, the process is reversed and the animal exchanges its white pelage for a brownish coat.

Though it lives in a country of deep snows, the animal is able to travel rapidly over the surface because it possesses large hind feet and long, spreading toes that are entirely covered with a heavy coat of hair and form broad snowshoe-like pads.

Snowshoe rabbits are mainly nocturnal, but are often found by hunters because the animals have a habit of making definite, beaten runways that make the rabbits easy to snare.

Popular as a game animal in States along the northern border of the United States, the average adult snowshoe hare weighs about 5 pounds and is important to Indians and trappers in the isolated regions of the north as a source of food.

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