

Making Ripples

Real “Easter Bunnies” Across the US

by Amanda Bancroft

Looking up the history of holiday traditions related to wildlife is as funny (and thought-provoking) as listening to David Sedaris’ work “Jesus Shaves,” a hilarious short piece about students from around the world explaining their culture’s Easter beliefs in a language class for non-native speakers. For the curious amateur historian, here is a brief rundown on popular Easter bunny origins.

Many people believe the beginning of our secular Easter traditions came from Pagan symbols of fertility and spring, such as rabbits and eggs. The goddess of fertility, Eostre, is said to be symbolized by a bunny. According to Time magazine, the egg-bundance of the holiday arises from olden-day Lenten restrictions in which church members had to refrain from consuming eggs until Easter day when eggs were ornately decorated. The well-known Easter Bunny who delivers eggs and treats probably came with German immigrants to America in the 1700’s, and just like Santa’s cookies, kids left carrots for the busy bunny.

The Easter bunny may be a symbol of fertility, but not all rabbits breed prolifically. In fact, one rabbit that makes its home in Washington state sagebrush has had such a population decline (due to agricultural development, predation, and wildfires) that the very last purebred died in 2008. The Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit (*Brachylagus idahoensis*) is the smallest North American rabbit and the only one that digs burrows.

Oddly enough, it’s difficult to get them to breed, despite crossbreeding with Idaho pygmies. But according to the Oregon Zoo, pygmies tend to reproduce more successfully with mates they “fall in love with,” rather than individuals they’re matched with based on genetics. Mates who choose each other have larger litters composed of healthier kits who live longer than kits from litters where the parents are unfamiliar with each other. As of last year, the population in Washington is recovering with the release of these happy pairs and their offspring. With their adorable cherub-like faces, pygmies are much better symbols of love than reproduction, and their success may shed light on giant pandas, another species reluctant to breed.

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the New England cottontail has seen an 80 percent population decline since 1960 and is no longer found in Vermont. This is partly due to habitat loss and the introduction of already abundant Eastern Cottontails which compete with the New England cottontail.

Our local Eastern Cottontails are still doing fine population-wise, but March through May tends to cause an abundance of deaths due to motor vehicle collisions as the roadside vegetation gets greener faster than the fields. So look out for the Easter bunnies on the highways and byways to ensure that our neighborhood Peter Cottontails can continue hopping down our bunny trails.

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist building an off-grid earthbag cottage for land conservation on Mt. Kessler. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer a solar-hosted online educational center on how to make a difference with lifestyle choices at: www.RipplesBlog.org.