
My Friend, Jack

by: Marguerite Lanham

THAT IS, JACK, FOR JACKRABBIT

Black-tailed Jackrabbit (*Lepus californicus*). Weight – 7 lbs., length – 25 in.

Eats grass, plants, cactus, mesquite, sagebrush, snakeweed. Lives in arid country from Oregon to Mexico.

When the first settlers arrived in the West they were greeted by a long-eared, long-legged animal they named “jackass rabbit.” They were wrong on both counts. Neither jackass nor rabbit, the jackrabbit actually belongs to the genus of hares.

Rabbits are born blind and naked of hair, completely helpless, in a burrow, while jackrabbits deposit their young, fully furred with their eyes wide open, in a slight hollow on top of the ground. Jackrabbit young are soon able to run and forage for themselves.

Jackrabbit ears are six to eight inches long, red-veined and black tipped. They are constantly in motion to catch sounds from all directions. Their ears also serve as temperature regulators, gathering the sun’s energy for warmth or radiating excess heat into the atmosphere. The original heat pump?

A jackrabbit’s ears and long hind legs are its lifeline. Jackrabbits have been clocked at 40 miles per hour when flat out running but prefer a bounding gait where a high



leap can, for a brief moment, put them on an observation platform of air. From here their large protruding eyes can scan the horizon for pursuers. And pursued they are by owls, coyotes, hawks, bobcats and eagles. A jackrabbit has a long life span but the hungry mouths of the desert willingly cut it short.

A large dark-coated jackrabbit has chosen the desert terrain around our home for his foraging territory. The first time I saw him he ran like a – well, a scared jackrabbit. At my call of “Hi, Jack” he continued his fifteen foot long bounds and four foot high leaps and disappeared in the bursage and cholla.

I’ve seen my “Jack” many times through the years, always in the same area. Knowing that jackrabbits have territories and are not footloose wanderers, I choose



to think this is the same jackrabbit. Maybe, maybe not, but he always stops to look at my call of “Hi, Jack” before “spring-boarding” his way out of sight.

On a recent very hot day I was surprised to see “Jack” sitting in the path near the back door. I stepped onto the patio and said, “Hi, Jack.” He made a couple of slow hops, then turned around and sat down. This was a first.

Thinking he needed a drink, I stepped into the shadows and watched. In normal rainfall years jackrabbits live very well on desert vegetation, seldom needing extra moisture. However, in drought times, such as the Sonoran Desert is now experiencing, a drink of water is welcome.

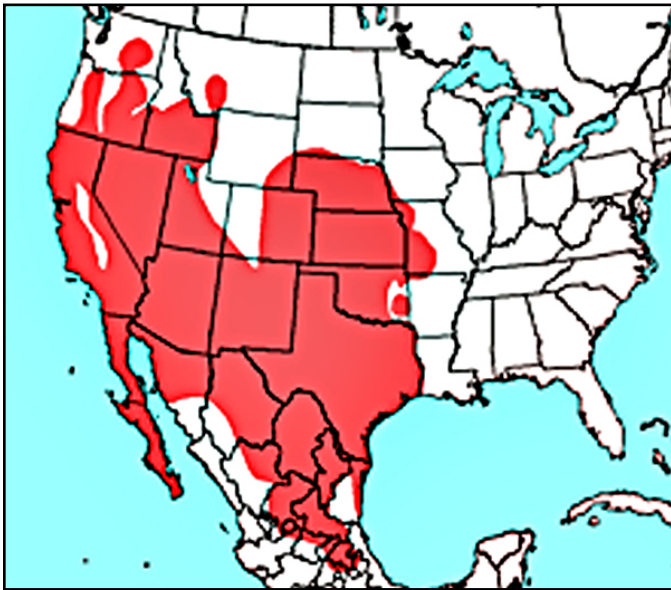
The water containers, three of them – one shallow for baby quail, one medium-sized for larger critters, and a bucket for deer – under a large jojoba bush were a short distance from where he sat. And he sat and sat. Something wrong with the water? They all seemed to be full. And then a movement deep in dappled shade caught my eye. Another pair of long flicking ears. A long narrow head lay chin



down with the bulge of a back barely showing above a shallow depression. Intrigued, I stepped closer for a better view. This definitely was another full-grown jackrabbit. Its color was a lighter gray, its size slightly smaller than “Jack.” Close by, lying against the water bucket, was a limp, still wet newborn jackrabbit. The mystery was solved. Or was it?

Jackrabbits are notoriously lacking in conjugal fidelity. A brief encounter, a cavalier parting and wait for romance to call again might best describe their mating practices. So why had “Jack” sat in hot sunlight patiently waiting? Have we missed something in jackrabbit behavior? Or is the answer something we don’t want to know?

Knowing that jackrabbits give birth to two or more young, I left the group to their affairs and went about mine. Later in the day when I looked, they were gone. Anyway, welcome to the neighborhood little “Jack.”¹



¹ All graphics courtesy Wikipedia

