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On the Trail of Wakulla's Cottontail Rabbits

In fairy tales, cartoons and modern literature, the rabbit is portrayed as a harmless, innocent spirit with only the best of intentions. Even Bugs Bunny with his wisecracking Brooklyn/Bronx accent was the model of restrained sarcastic humor intending to poke fun at the obvious absurdities of contemporary life and procure the necessary and ever-present carrot.

After all, a small furry creature with big blinking eyes and cute buckteeth is an immediate candidate for a hug. There could be no better creature to bring colorful eggs to children awaiting the Easter Bunny.



Wakulla County's rabbit population certainly qualifies for all of the above with the appropriate amount of cuteness, but popular myths and reality diverge at this point.

The local rabbits are cottontails of the genus *Sylvilagus*. They are related to hares and pikas, a mouse-like mammal which lives in northern ranges of Europe, Asia and North America.

While similar in appearance, hares and rabbits have several importance differences. The most obvious is the young at birth.

Rabbits give birth to blind, hairless young. Hares give birth to fur covered young with well-developed eyesight.

Unlike the remainder of the world's rabbit population, cottontails utilize nest in thick well-disguised sites to raise their young, and to gather when not foraging. Other rabbits in Europe, East Asia, and North America live in underground warrens.

Subterranean warrens would prove to be a problem from several perspectives for Wakulla's cottontails. The first is the potential for flooding during sudden summer showers. The helpless young would quickly drown.

The second, and most likely the greatest problem from the rabbit's perspective, is snakes. The legless reptiles are a major population control factor to the highly prolific rabbits. A warren

would prove to be a compartmentalized smorgasbord for any large snake that happened by the entrance.

Rabbits are herbivores which eat a variety of tender foliage plants. Many vegetable gardens and highly manicured landscapes have been reduced to little more than decimated wastelands by troupes of ravenous cottontails.

The local rabbits are most active at dawn and dusk using the low light and long shadows as camouflage. In addition to snakes, rabbits have to be concerned about their high standing on the menu of coyotes, birds of prey, and the occasional fox.