

Wildlife Express!

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The Petite Pygmy Rabbit



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From Food Chains . . .

Have you ever heard the saying, "One thing leads to another?" This sure is true with food chains.

Food chains are formed when one animal eats a plant and then another animal eats it. Each plant or animal is one link in the chain. At each link, energy is passed from one link to the next.

Some links are easy to see. Almost all food chains start with the sun. Plants, like sagebrush, use the energy from the sun to make the sugar and food needed to grow. A pygmy rabbit eats the sagebrush and uses the energy stored in the leaf. A bobcat may then eat the pygmy rabbit, and the energy in the rabbit is passed to the bobcat. Sun links to sagebrush, which links to pygmy rabbit, which links to bobcat.

Sometimes things other than just energy and nutrients pass from one animal to the next. Chemicals used to kill certain plants have been found in birds. How did the poison get into their bodies when they didn't eat the plants the poison was sprayed on?

The answer can be found by following the links in the food chain. Mice had swallowed the poison when eating plants. The poison does not leave the bodies of the mice. It is stored in their body fat. When the birds ate the mice, they also ate the poison that was in the mice.

Food chains can teach people how their actions not only affect the plants or animals they want to get rid of, but also animals they do not want to harm.



. . . To Food Webs

Food webs are made up of food chains that are linked together. If you could draw one out, a food web might look a bit like a spider web.

Food webs help show us how plants and animals are connected in nature. No matter how different and separate plants and animals may seem, their food chains connect them in some way.



A Food Web

Would you think that a salamander would be connected to a wolf? It may be hard to see this connection, but it is there.

Here are the food chains that connect salamanders to wolves. Wolves eat moose, and moose eat cattails. Salamanders eat aquatic insects, and the insects eat moss growing on cattails. Salamanders and wolves are connected in the food web by cattails. If the cattails around a pond are removed, both the wolves and salamanders might be affected, along with every other animal in the food web.

Everything in nature is connected in some way. Food webs help us see those connections in nature. Do you think you might be connected to salamanders? Think of different food chains and webs to see if you can find a connection.

Let's Look At... Pygmy Rabbits



There is one word that describes the pygmy rabbit better than any other – cute! Pygmy rabbits [*Brachylagus*(braka-ee-LAG-us) *idahoensis*(i-dah-o-EN-sis)] are cutie-pies. Their little size, big black eyes and short rounded ears just make a person want to cuddle them. But don't try it! You might get scratched.

As you probably figured out by the name, pygmy rabbits are small. They are the smallest rabbits in Idaho. They are less than one foot long and weigh less than one pound. In Idaho, pygmy rabbits are found in the southern and east-central parts of the state. You can tell pygmy rabbits apart from other rabbits in Idaho, but you have to look carefully. Unlike their cousins the cottontail, pygmy rabbits don't have the white puffball of fur on the underside of their tails. Pygmy rabbits also have rounder ears and rust-colored fur on their legs and back of their necks.

One thing pygmy rabbits must have in their habitat is sagebrush. Big, tall sagebrush is best. Sagebrush offers pygmy rabbits cover and food. It is about the only thing pygmy rabbits eat during the winter. In the spring and summer, grasses and wild flowers are on the menu. The sagebrush needs to be growing in deep, loose soil, because pygmy rabbits make their own burrows to live in. Burrows usually have two or more entrances. Entrances are hidden at the bases of sagebrush. Underground the burrows lead to connected rooms. Pygmy rabbits have pretty fancy homes compared to other rabbits. Above ground, pygmy rabbits use a system of runways between sagebrush plants. They move by scampering close to the ground. Leaping would only draw the attention of predators. During the winter, pygmy rabbits make burrows under the snow. These burrows allow pygmy rabbits to hide under the snow while getting food, and they don't have to go out in the cold winter air.

Spring and early summer are breeding time for the pygmy rabbit. The females dig special dens lined with fur and grass to have their young. As many as six bunnies are born in a litter, and females may have up to three litters per year! The little rabbits are helpless when born. They need to try and stay hidden as much as possible. Many animals love to eat pygmy rabbits. Both the adults and young are preyed upon, but the first five weeks of their lives are the most dangerous. Weasels, coyotes, badgers, owls, hawks and foxes are just some of the animals that might eat a pygmy rabbit. Besides the protection of their burrows, the color of the rabbit's fur helps it to avoid predators. Their colors of brown and gray help them to blend into the ground and sagebrush. They also are capable of short bursts of speed to try to escape a predator.

Predators are not the biggest threat to pygmy rabbits – loss of sagebrush is. The article, "Helping Ecosystems, Helping Wildlife", will give you more information on this problem. With everyone working together, these little cutie-pies will continue to roam Idaho's sagebrush deserts.



Clever Defenses



Can you find the fawn in this picture?

Can you think of an animal that has a clever way of protecting itself? Animals may use color, armor, or even poison to protect themselves.

Pygmy rabbits use camouflage and speed. Their dull colors of gray and brown are perfect for blending into the soil and sagebrush around them. If a predator does see them, pygmy rabbits quickly run and dart about to get away from danger.

Turtles use armor. Turtle shells are hard and tough. The outside of the shell looks just like dirt or rocks to help camouflage the turtle. Turtles' necks are very flexible, and the skin around the neck is loose. This allows the turtle to pull its whole neck inside the shell when danger is near. Most turtles fold their necks in an "S" shape inside the shell.

Some lizards also have armor. Horned lizards come to mind. They are covered by sharp, pointy scales. Horned lizards have another way to protect themselves. They can squirt blood out of the corner of their eyes! The blood may go as far as three feet. This definitely will startle a predator!

Poison is a good defense, too. Sometimes an animal might not look dangerous. Many frogs, toads and salamanders have glands on them that make poison. If they aren't poisonous, they may taste awful. Poisonous animals are sometimes bright and colorful. Their bright colors are a warning to stay away. Other animals may try to copy the way a poisonous animal looks. They pretend to be nasty, so predators will leave them alone, too.

Think of a skunk. The stripes on a skunk are a warning to stay away, and boy, do they smell bad! Once an animal has had a run-in with a skunk, it most likely won't get too close to one again.

Can you think of other clever ways animals protect themselves? There are just about as many clever defenses as there are animals.

A Cluster of Critters

You may know that deer hang out in herds. A group of rabbits is a colony or nest. But have you ever heard of a knot of toads or a murder of crows? How about a kettle of hawks? The English language has hundreds of names for groups or collections of critters.

Many animal group names date back to the Middle Ages. Some names were hunting terms. Hunters would pursue a dray of squirrels or a spring of teal.

There are many reasons why someone may have first chosen a particular name. The sounds the animals make – a murmuration of starlings. The animals' homes – a nest of pheasants. What the gathering looks like – a knot of toads. A repetition of sounds the animal makes – a gaggle of geese.

Some names are mistakes. A school of fish was first called a shoal of fish. Fish gather in a shoal, a shallow place in a river or lake. A long time ago someone translated shoal of fish as school of fish, and the name stuck.



A gaggle of geese

Here are some other animal group names. Can you think of more?



A herd of bighorn sheep

Army of frogs
Cete of badgers
Covey of quail
Cloud of gnats
Gang of elk

Hive of bees
Leash of fox
Tribe of goats
Romp of otters
Pack of wolves

Charm of finches
Descent of woodpeckers
Hover of trout
Raft of ducks

Spring has Sprung!

The days are getting longer. The weather is getting warmer, and there is excitement in the air. That can only mean one thing – it's spring! If you watch and listen carefully, you may see that animals are aware that it's spring, too.

What kinds of things are happening with wildlife in the spring? It is a busy time for them. Animals all around are looking for mates and places to have their young. Skunks and foxes are searching for dens. Birds are establishing territories and building new nests. Great horned owls, which start to lay eggs in February, may already have chicks learning to fly.

The hardships of winter are over for many animals. Deer and elk are heading for higher ground where new, nutritious food is now available. Another sign telling us that warm weather is ahead is the molting of animals' coats. Elk and deer shed their winter coats and grow new lighter coats. Big clumps of hair can also be found hanging off a mountain goat's coat. Animals, such as the weasel that grew a special white coat to blend in with the snow, must replace it with their brown summertime coat.

Hungry bear cubs, weighing only three to four pounds, are coming out of their dens with their mothers. Romping and playing are only part of what they do. At other times, their mothers are teaching them how to find food and to survive on their own.

The sun's warmth and longer days also brings about the beginning of another year in the lifecycle of amphibians and reptiles. Having spent the winter in an underground hideaway, these animals need to find places in the sun to bask. The sun's warmth helps them to raise their body temperatures.

In the springtime, songbirds brighten our lives with flashes of color and beautiful song; they announce the coming of spring after winter.

Look and listen. What signs of spring are near you?



Sagebrush

What is sagebrush? Sagebrush is one of the most important plants in Idaho's desert environment.

This woody shrub provides food and/or cover for many desert animals year-round.



The plant grows three to four feet tall, but shrubs of up to 10 feet have been found in areas with deep soil and plenty of moisture. Sagebrush found in rocky, dry areas might only be a foot tall. In late summer or early fall, small golden yellow flowers bloom on the sagebrush plant, but you have to look closely to see them. You can tell sagebrush by its smell. It has a sweet, strong odor, especially after a rain.

Sagebrush has adapted very well to the harsh conditions where it lives. It has narrow leaves that are covered with tiny hairs. This helps to protect the plant from drying out both in the heat and in the cold of winter. The root system of sagebrush is also unique. It has developed so that it can water itself. At night, the tap root of sagebrush pulls moisture from deep in the soil to shallow branching roots that grow near the surface. During the day, the shallow roots use this water to keep the shrub alive.

If you've ever walked near sagebrush, you might think the gnarly (NAR-ly) looking plant is pretty tough. The fact is sagebrush is actually very fragile. It does not grow back easily after disturbances. Wildfires pose a huge threat to sagebrush. It takes many years, even decades, for sagebrush to fully grow back.

Sagebrush is not only important for animals. Native Americans used it for many things. The wood was burned for fuel or used to build dwellings, or places to live. The leaves contain camphor, which was used for coughs, colds, headaches, fever and to relieve most any kind of pain. The leaves and seeds of sagebrush were eaten.

The rare ecosystem of sagebrush is in need of help. If measures are not taken to protect it, the animals that depend on it may no longer be with us.

Helping Ecosystems, Helping Wildlife

In 2001, the U.S. Congress began to give money to states to help them conserve all of their fish and wildlife. This was called the State Wildlife Grants Program. To receive the money, states had to develop a Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CWCS). People from tribal, state, federal and private organizations all helped to write Idaho's strategy.

The CWCS identifies which animals and habitats need help. It mentions problems they face and offers steps to try and help those species and habitats in greatest need. The Southern Xeric Shrubland and Steppe (step) ecosystem is one ecosystem that needs some help. Xeric (**zer-ik**) means dry. This is the ecosystem where pygmy rabbits live. If we conserve and protect this habitat, we will also help the pygmy rabbit.

The sagebrush pygmy rabbits depend upon has disappeared over the years. As people settled the west, they altered the land. Some sagebrush was cleared to make fields. People also brought with them a weed called cheatgrass. The seeds cling to the fur of animals and the tires of vehicles. Cheatgrass spreads quickly and grows better and faster than sagebrush after a fire. It also burns easily. With fires occurring more often than normal, sagebrush doesn't have a chance to recover. Now, it is found in many places where sagebrush once grew.

This means pygmy rabbits must search out a new patch of sagebrush. Imagine you are on a sinking island, and you had to swim across the ocean to find a new home. Which direction do you go, and how do you hide from predators? If you can't find an island quickly, you will die. Pygmy rabbits face the same sorts of problems.

Protecting pygmy rabbits' habitat "islands" is the best way to help them. This means protecting and restoring sagebrush. Controlling weeds, like cheatgrass, is very important. People are looking at ways to reduce the spread of weeds and keep them out of healthy stands of sagebrush. Planting the seeds of native shrubs and plants after a fire will help. It is also important to protect the sagebrush "bridges" that allow pygmy rabbits to move to new habitats.

Everyone needs to work together to protect and restore sagebrush habitat. CWCS is a tool that offers steps to protect fragile ecosystems. This will help not only the pygmy rabbit, but other wildlife species, as well.



Let Them Be

Spring is a time for renewal. It's a time to get out of the house and explore all the wonders of nature. Walks, bike rides and fishing trips may take us closer to wildlife. You may see baby animals. It's a true sign that spring has arrived.

When you hear people talking about enjoying animals, remember it is especially important that we leave animals alone. Let them do the things they need to do to survive. Getting too close to wild animals might stress them and cause them to die.

As humans, we have an urge to take care of things we think are helpless, especially "cute" animals, like the pygmy rabbit. If you see a baby animal, don't assume it has been abandoned by its mother. Most of the time, this isn't the case. Mothers often leave their young hidden while they go away to eat. If the mother stayed close to her baby, she could actually draw the attention of a predator. You may have scared the mother away. She will return once "danger" has passed.

If you know that an animal is orphaned because the mother has died, call your local Fish and Game office. They will take the animal to a wildlife rehabilitator. Chances are if you take an animal home, it will die. Caring for a wild animal is not the same as caring for a pet. They need special foods, cages and treatments. Wildlife rehabilitators are specially trained and licensed to care for them.

Wildlife should not be handled, fed, chased or disturbed. If an animal will let you close enough to pick it up, it may be sick. Do not pick up a wild animal – dead or alive.

Wild animals are just that – wild! They survive on their own just fine without any help from people. Wild animals are unique and wonderful, view them from a distance and leave wildlife in the wild.



Pygmy Rabbit Wordsearch

Words

**BURROWS
ROUNDED**

**CAMOUFLAGE
SAGEBRUSH**

**COLONY
SMALLEST**

**ECOSYSTEMS
WEBS**

**LESS
WILDLIFE**

Pygmy rabbits' colors help them to _____.

The most important thing in a pygmy rabbit's habitat is _____.

Pygmy rabbits are the _____ rabbits in Idaho.

Food _____ can help people see how everything in nature is connected.

Pygmy rabbits have short, _____ ears.

There is _____ sagebrush in Idaho them there once was.

Pygmy rabbits dig large _____.

CWCS is a tool that offers steps to protect fragile _____.

A group of rabbits is called a _____.

It's best to leave _____ in the wild.

R	X	A	L	Z	S	K	P	T	Q	V	U	Z	C	H
O	C	O	G	U	R	M	S	V	S	E	P	L	D	S
U	G	P	U	C	M	E	E	O	H	X	N	M	O	U
N	F	L	I	P	L	P	A	T	S	J	S	M	A	R
D	O	E	J	L	S	M	L	R	S	Z	O	Z	D	B
E	L	O	A	V	C	J	R	E	E	Y	W	G	M	E
D	N	M	W	I	L	D	L	I	F	E	S	O	G	G
B	S	K	E	K	Q	Q	R	T	G	E	B	O	Q	A
T	U	B	R	X	S	S	E	L	J	X	J	T	C	S
L	C	R	E	E	G	A	L	F	U	O	M	A	C	E
Q	R	P	R	W	C	S	J	Y	C	R	A	O	X	L
X	Q	Q	O	O	Y	N	F	Q	R	B	L	Q	H	F
X	A	R	V	I	W	I	L	M	K	O	A	X	V	L
A	S	E	L	D	D	S	Z	A	N	K	M	P	K	A
X	Y	T	D	G	U	U	L	Y	H	D	Q	J	E	V

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