UI Extension Forestry Information Series II
Wildlife No. 13

Snowshoe Hares

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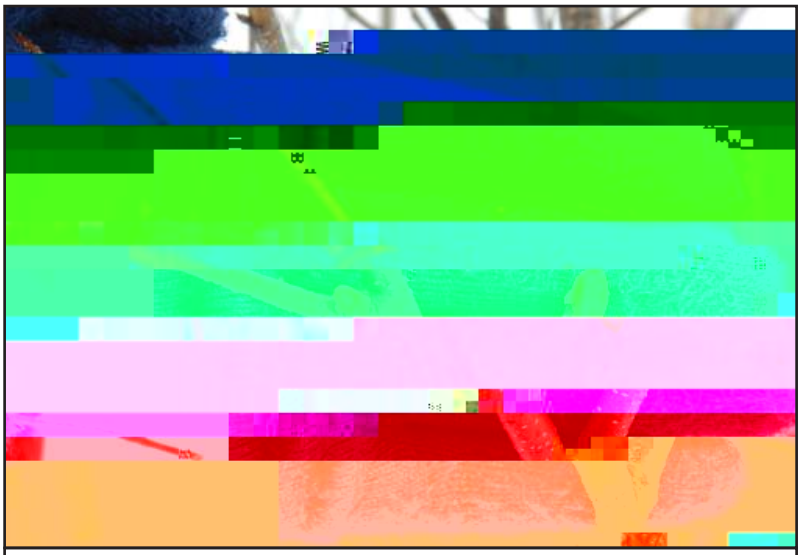
Lately a lot of foresters and forest owners have been telling me they are seeing more snowshoe hares (Lepus americanus) in the woods. Many people (myself included) enjoy seeing this charismatic hare (hares, unlike rabbits, give birth to fully furred offspring which are pretty much ready to ambulate immediately after birth). Snowshoe hares turning from brown to white is as much a part of Idaho's changing seasons as aspen and larch turning yellow. Snowshoe hares are also eaten by nearly every carnivore capable of subduing them, making them a very important part of forest ecosystems – in boreal forests some ecologists describe them as a keystone species.

Snowshoe hares produce up to 3-4 litters annually of 4-6 young, and they have a cyclical population that peaks every 9-10 years. Remarkably, this population cycle is fairly synchronized across the species' entire range. Idaho snowshoe hares tend to hit their peak more or less the same year or two that hare populations peak in Canada and Alaska. This has been a topic of active theorizing among scientists studying hares and all of the creatures that rely heavily on them for food. Populations crash due to a combination of increasing predators, decreasing food supply, and possibly some other factors scientists are still trying to Þgure out.

While many enjoy seeing snowshoe hares, foresters and forest owners trying to establish tree seedlings may not enjoy them as much when populations are high. Snowshoe hares consume understory vegetation in the summer, but during winter they often feed on trees. Snowshoe hares can cause extensive damage to tree seedlings, especially during peak years.

Adult snoeshoe hare (Lepus americanus) in winter colors.

Photo courtesy of Terry Spivey, USDA Forest Service, Bugwood.org.



Snowshoe hare damage typically takes 2 forms: 1) a clean-angled cut of seedling tops or lateral branches or 2) debarked seedlings or young saplings (stems less than 1.5 inches thick).

Photo courtesy of Brett Marshall, Sault College, Bigwood.org