

Chautauqua Watershed Notes
From the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy
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Snowshoe Hares are Changing Their Look with the Onset of Spring
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For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy



As toothwort and trout lily emerge from winter's dormancy, snowshoe hares will be courting and shifting colors from white to gray.

The snowshoe hare is one of those charismatic wildlife species you think about when the snow is deep with visions of them bounding effortlessly through the drifts. But where are they and what are they doing the rest of the year? This time of year if you see a snowshoe hare, chances are it won't be one of those classic solid white beauties that are photographed most often. Snowshoe hares are also known as varying hares because their fur changes from white to gray brown with the change in seasons. The molt from white to gray brown begins in March in response to day length rather than temperature as you might assume. The shift back to white will take place in fall as days shorten. For this reason you may see a brown snowshoe hare when there is snow on the ground or a white snowshoe hare when there is no snow present, or many variations between the two.

Where these animals live and thrive is primarily affected by two factors: the presence and abundance of predators and food. Common predators include red fox, long-tailed weasel,

domestic dogs and cats, and great-horned owls. Snowshoe hares have many attributes that allow them to escape predators: they have excellent hearing and keen eyesight, although because the eyes are located on sides of head allowing a wide field of vision, they are hampered by limited depth perception. They can run up to 30 mph in open areas and bound up to 12 feet, and if they must, they can swim to safety. They also make a variety of noises, from thumping their feet to grunting, clicking or even screaming. Just the thing to give winter campers extra chills on a spooky moonless evening.

Their hind feet serve as snowshoes due to the large and spreading toes covered by dense hair. This enables them to traverse drifts of snow leading them up to resources such as swelling buds, bark, and tender stems they cannot reach at other times of the year. Hares scratch out simple above-ground resting spots (called forms) or use hollow logs or rock shelters rather than digging a burrow like those preferred by rabbits. Cover is important—a slight rise allows a hare to keep watch for predators and overhanging vegetation provides both visual and thermal shelter. March, when the first plants are emerging from the forest floor to provide fresh forage, is also the time of year when courtship begins, and a little over a month later, one to seven young will be born in the form. The young hares can see and move around on their own almost immediately, unlike rabbits which are born hairless and blind. Home ranges vary from 19 to 25 acres and although they can live eight or nine years, few survive the clutches of predators to reach old age.

In our region, snowshoe hares inhabit thickly forested swamps and bogs and prefer habitats with dense understory vegetation like that found within the Cassadaga Creek Preserve and portions of the Elm Flats and Outlet Greenway Preserve. Recent studies are finding that the abundance of snowshoe hares is declining. This may be due to the fact that they share habitat with an abundant deer population with which they compete for forage, combined with the fact that many forests are evenly-aged and lack complex mosaics of interweaving habitat types. This trend underscores the importance of managing our landscapes for the full complement of species native to the region.

The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy is a local 501(c)(3) not-for-profit, public benefit corporation supported primarily by membership donations. Its mission is to preserve, and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. Its annual membership campaign is currently underway. For more information or to support these efforts, please call 664-2166 or go to www.chautauquawatershed.org.