

BOGDIVERSITY THURSDAY



—*from Head Naturalist Clinton*

Snowshoe Hare

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It might be appropriate, following this round of heavy snow, to profile a species that is very good at surviving in lots of snow and cold. The species of note today is one that is very abundant in the Sax-Zim Bog, but is seen by comparatively few visitors. Its sign is everywhere: along boardwalks, trails, and even the roadside. Our species of interest today is the Snowshoe Hare!

As noted above, Snowshoe Hares are quite abundant in the Sax-Zim Bog, but very few visitors see them. They tend to be crepuscular, active at dawn and dusk. In the winter, their coat changes from brown to white, which makes them very difficult to see against the snowy landscape they call home. If you visit the Sax-Zim Bog during the summer months, Snowshoe Hares have changed their coat to a soft brown, but will often retain white colored feet. This seasonal color change is triggered by changes in sunlight and color usually begins to change from the bottom of the animal to the top!

Snowshoe Hares might be related to familiar species like Eastern Cottontail, but rabbits and hares are very different. For example, rabbits build nests that are home to hairless, helpless, and blind young. Hares give birth to fully furred, active, and sighted babies. Even the names of their young differ. Young rabbits are called kits, where young hares are called leverets!

In the Northwoods, Snowshoe Hares have been studied fairly extensively. Historically, Snowshoe Hares were a popular species to trap and hunt. Harvest data on this species gave clues to the cyclic nature of their populations. Sure enough, every 10 years Snowshoe Hares run through a period of high and low population numbers. This cycle is also somewhat tied to their main predators' abundance. Northern Goshawks and Canada Lynx are major predators of Snowshoe Hare and their populations fluctuate in concert with one another. In Alaska, their population cycles also influence a number of other unrelated species, including Dall Sheep! During periods of high populations, Coyotes and Golden Eagles take fewer Dall Sheep lambs, in favor of hares. This increases the population of Dall Sheep for a few years, until hare populations decrease once again.

To evade those predators, camouflage surely helps, but so does the adaptation to their feet! Snowshoe Hares are named for their large, furry feet that help them travel across snow with ease. With an increased surface area, they can escape ground-based predators like Bobcats or foxes with ease. Most of the tracks we see from these critters in the Bog are made during the night or at dawn and dusk when they are most active. Snowshoe Hares are

herbivores and eat a lot of woody browse during the winter months when food is not as accessible. You can use Snowshoe Hare foraging marks as good indicators of snow depth from year to year, as they can only access certain branches with proper snow depth.

More about these cool hares is included in the photos below!

(Photos of Snowshoe hares by Sparky Stensaas; Photos of tracks and sign by Head Naturalist Clinton)



Snowshoe Hares are very difficult to find against white backgrounds. They tend to sit very still and wait until potential threats have passed.



March is the time for combat if you are a Snowshoe Hare! These two were dueling along the Warren Woessner Bog Boardwalk. If you note, one of these hares is already transitioning to summer colors.



Summertime Snowshoe Hares are very well adapted to bogs and actually swim quite well! The ditches and wetlands through the Sax-Zim Bog are little challenge for this species.



Snowshoe Hares have large hind feet that make traveling over snow very easy. Hares and rabbits have similar track patterns, with the hind feet in front of the front feet!



This is pretty typical foraging sign from a Snowshoe Hare! You will also find round scat near foraging locations.