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The snowshoe hare is found in every province and territory across Canada and is one of our most common creatures. It dwells year-round in sheltered coniferous forests, cedar bogs and swamps with a thick understory and is most active between dusk and dawn. Although solitary by nature, its home range may overlap with other snowshoe hares.

Telescoping ears with keen hearing alerts the hare to approaching threats. It also has a sensitive nose and can even swim well to escape a predator. Most remarkable, however, are two special adaptations that help the snowshoe hare to survive. The first being fur that changes colour with the seasons to provide excellent camouflage. When it senses a predator, the hare sometimes freezes in place and “disappears.” At this stage of the winter, the snowshoe hare is predominantly white with black-fringed ears. Very soon, reddish-brown hairs will begin to replace the white ones. By summer, it’s entirely brown, with the exception of a white belly -- and its ears, which retain black tips. In the fall, the process reverses: the white hairs gradually grow in, and by winter, the hare is snowy-white once again. These transitions are in response to the amount of daylight hours, with each taking around 72 days to complete. In some places, like the Olympic Mountains of Washington State, the hare never turns white, because the loss of daylight hours isn’t enough to trigger the molt. The second special adaptation that supports the hare’s survival, especially in winter, also inspired its name. Long, wide and thickly-furred hind feet act like snowshoes, enabling the hare to move atop the deepest snow at speeds upwards of 40 km / 25 miles per hour. Propelled by these powerful feet, it leaps and bounds with sudden changes of direction to outmaneuver a predator. By thumping its feet on the ground, the snowshoe hare can also communicate with other individuals.

The diet of a snowshoe hare changes with the seasons. In warmer months, it eats grasses, small leafy plants, flowers, and the shoots of trees, like aspens. Winter fare includes buds, twigs, bark and pine needles. It’s surprising to learn that the snowshoe hare may scavenge on the remains of its own kind during the winter months. Stranger still, it must routinely eat a specific type of its own feces (it produces two kinds). Because much of the digestion process occurs in the last stretch of the gut, it must be sent through the hare’s digestive tract a second time to extract optimal nutrition.

Snowshoe hare mating season runs from early spring through summer. Males follow the females around as they wander their home ranges, and both sexes have multiple mates. Gestation lasts 36 days, and when delivery is imminent, a pregnant female becomes hostile to all males. She prepares a birthing place by packing down the grass and adding bits of her fur. There, she bears a litter of 1-8 “kittens.” The young are ambulatory shortly after birth and leave the nest area within a few days to venture out into the world with their mother. At around 1 month of age, they are weaned. A female snowshoe hare can bear a few litters of young each year, potentially producing lots of offspring annually. This prolific reproduction rate is paramount, considering roughly 85% of the youngsters won’t survive their first year. The snowshoe hare has many predators, including wolves, coyotes, foxes, lynx, bobcats, fishers, mink, eagles, hawks and owls, making it an important prey species within its ecosystem’s food web.

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