

# Jackalope: A Horned-Hare Tale

BY JIM HEFFELFINGER

**W**estern residents know the jackalope is a real and genuine member of the native fauna—only the tourists are skeptical. They pull into local communities all over the western and southwestern United States and buy up mounted jackalope heads as if they are merely humorous souvenirs. Luckily, like their jackrabbit relatives, the jackalope is a prolific breeder and has a high reproductive rate to compensate for the high taxidermy rate.

Not much is known about the life history characteristics of the jackalope. What we do know had to be pieced together from fragmentary observations and chance encounters. Although common, they are very, very wary (or as Elmer Fudd would say, “Vewy, Vewy, Wewy”). It’s fortunate our somewhat embarrassing, but famous cartoon hunter Mr. Fudd did not pursue jackalope, for they are known to be aggressive and sometimes vicious. In some languages their common name

translates to “Warrior Rabbit,” which denotes the fierce defense they can muster.

Jackalope milk has been heralded for centuries as a cure for many injuries and ailments—many of the injuries, however, were sustained during the process of actually trying to milk a jackalope. According to what little is known about their diet, their fondness of whiskey has been the downfall of many, and may be the single most contributing factor to the sheer volume of mounted jackalope heads being shipped to deer hunt camps and smoky taverns throughout the country each year.

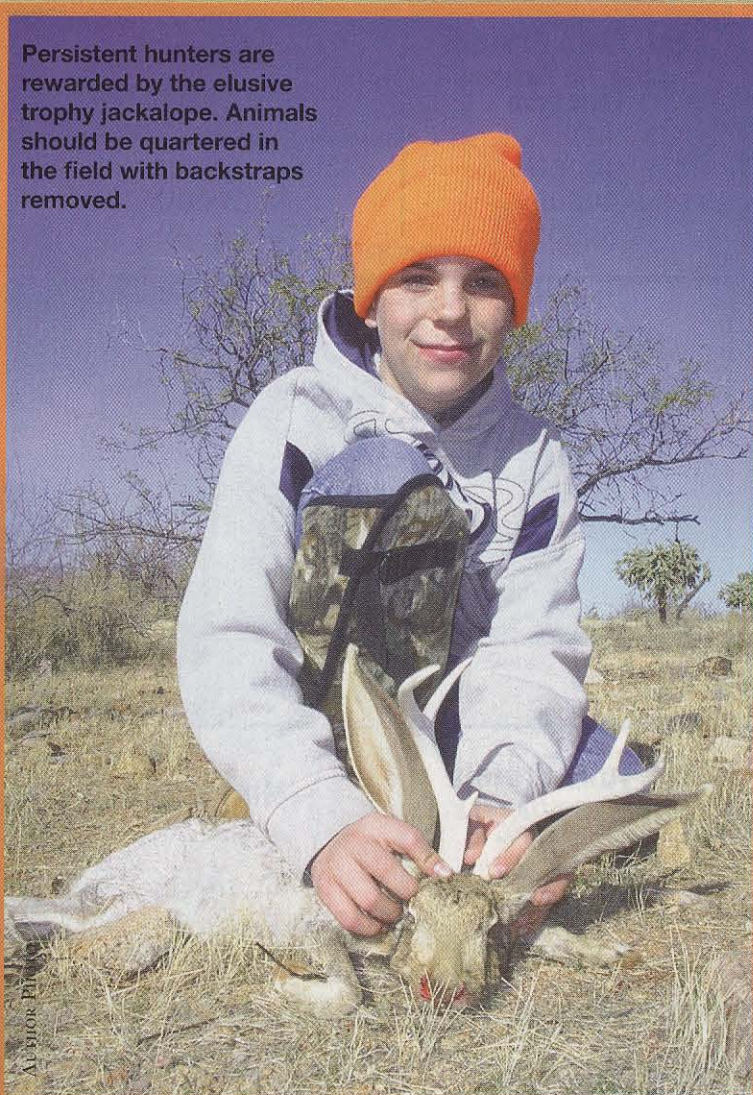
Their ability to mimic human voices has caused many a camper to huddle in a little closer to the campfire or to keep checking and rechecking the blued steel within reach. Although, cowboys spending a lot of time on the range talk of their welcomed accompaniment in campfire songs for tenor voices are in short supply in the rugged western outdoors.

## Horned-hare history

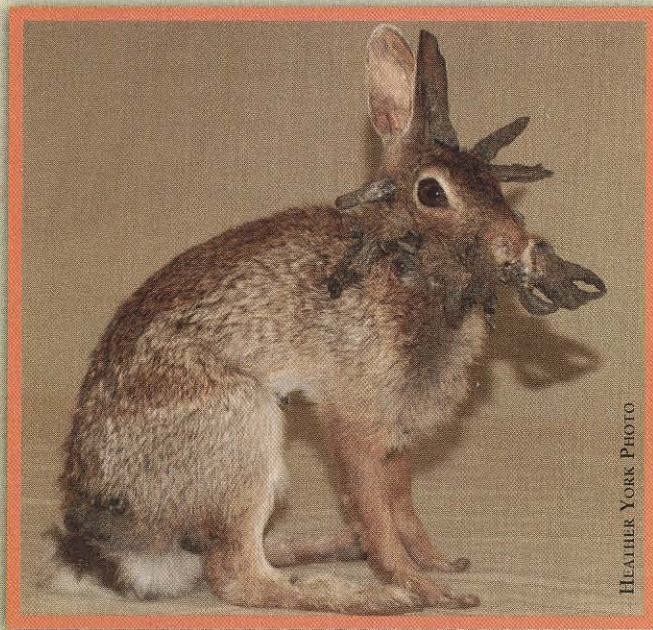
The existence of a hare with horns is not as unusual as one might think. The fossil record contains evidence of other small, grassland mammals with horns. In Nebraska and other states in the Great Plains, fossils have been unearthed of a giant horned gopher (*Ceratogaulus hatcheri*). This “gopherlope” was about a foot long and had a pair of horns growing out of the top of its nasal bones. Paleontologists also have fossil evidence of a dog-sized horned armadillo (*Peltephilus ferox*) that had a pair of horns over its eyes. This now-extinct armadillope lived in the grasslands of South America. It probably goes without saying that Pleistocene cavemen also doubted whether these were real or some sort of hoax by prehistoric wise-guys.

Reports of the jackalope have been known for well over 400 years. One of the first published accounts comes from a picture painted in the 1570s by Joris Hoefnagel in a German book on the natural history of wild animals. Other illustrations and writings mention this critter through the 1600s, 1700s, and 1800s. Many extensive mammal books of the day included some mention of the horned rabbit. Famous naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton traveled widely throughout the United States in the late 1800s and saw horned rabbits first hand. In 1909, Seton wrote in “Life Histories of Northern Game Animals:” “I had seen several cottontails so afflicted, and had heard of black-tailed jacks that were horned.”

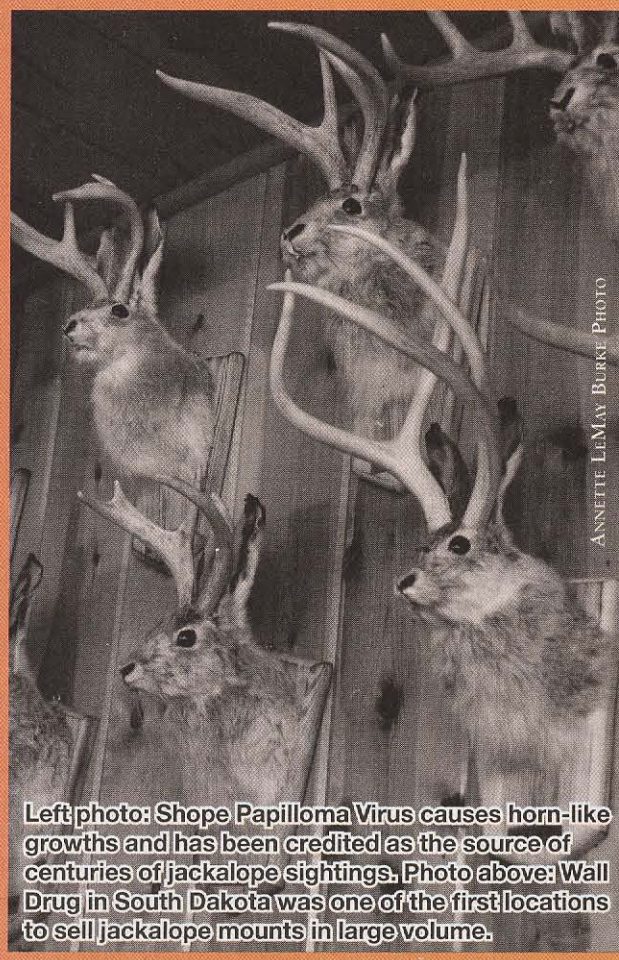
Persistent hunters are rewarded by the elusive trophy jackalope. Animals should be quartered in the field with backstraps removed.







HEATHER YORK PHOTO



ANNETTE LEMAY BURKE PHOTO

Left photo: Shope Papilloma Virus causes horn-like growths and has been credited as the source of centuries of jackalope sightings. Photo above: Wall Drug in South Dakota was one of the first locations to sell jackalope mounts in large volume.

### So they're real?

A TV commercial for the Iowa State Fair shows Sasquatch cruising down the road in a convertible, and as he drives past a jackalope sitting on the side of the road, he snaps his head around and says, "I didn't know those were real!" We have plenty of examples of mysterious creatures that have been reported for decades or even centuries without physical proof. How do these stories persist unless there was at least some truth to it?

As it turns out, there are plenty of specimens of horned rabbits in museum collections and some are still being found in the wild today. Some of these rabbits have horned outgrowths on top of their head, but others have the same growths on their face and neck also. Turning to the scientific literature for an answer, we find that there's a virus that causes horned growths on the skin of members of the rabbit family and many of these growths look very much like the horn sheath of pronghorn antelope.

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This disease, called *Shope papilloma virus*, causes tumors made of keratin (same material as real horns and hooves) to grown on or near the animal's head. Some of these tumors may be grotesque monstrosities in odd places, but others resemble true horns to a remarkable degree. These "horns" are not anchored to the skull or other bones, but rather skin tumors so they simply hang on the skin. This condition is

undoubtedly the source for persistent stories of rabbits with horns in so many countries for many centuries.

### Bringing the legend to life

Fame truly came to our furry legend in 1939, when 18-year-old Douglas Herrick from Douglas, Wyoming, tested out his developing skills as a young taxidermist by mounting a jackrabbit. According to his son Michael, he remarked to a friend that it would look funny to put a pair of deer antlers on it. It was too funny to resist, so he worked a set of antlers into the rabbit mount and the jackalope was born. He later showed the mount to Roy Ball who bought it for \$10 and displayed it in his Bonte Hotel in Douglas until it was stolen from the lobby in the late 1970s.

With World War II in full swing, Mr. Herrick set aside his taxidermy tools for a machine gun and saw Europe as a tail gunner on a B-17. After the war, he returned to taxidermy until the discovery of minerals, oil, and natural gas deposits in that part of Wyoming. The father of five growing kids quickly found that the booming oil industry paid more than jackalope hunters. In 1954 he went to work full time as a welder and pipe fitter for Amoco Refinery, leaving his brother Ralph to handle the "flood" of jackalope being brought to their taxidermy shop.

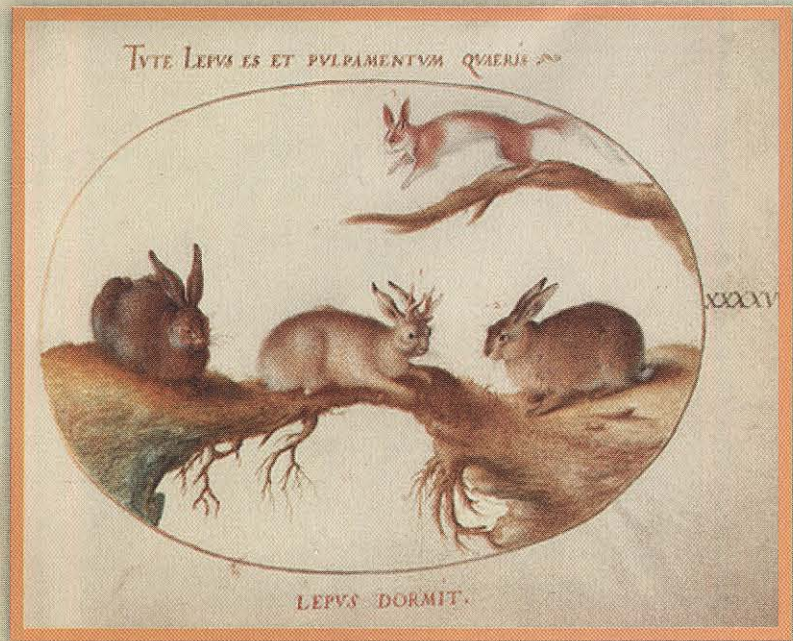


Since then, the Herrick family has mounted thousands and thousands. At one point they were delivering more than 1,000 each year to Wall Drug in South Dakota. Jackalope mounts can still be purchased at Wall Drug and many other roadside remnants of rural Americana. Modern shoppers need look no further than the Cabela's Web site. Today, Douglas' son Michael continues in the taxidermy business in Casper, Wyoming, and also produces beautiful antler carvings and bronze sculptures. He continues to mount "only" about 150-200 very high quality jackalope per year.

Douglas, Wyoming, is quite proud of being the self-proclaimed epicenter of the jackalope world. In 1985, Governor Ed Herschler officially designated the town "Home of the Jackalope" and authorized the use of its logo on all city property from park benches to city vehicles. The Douglas Chamber of Commerce developed the annual celebration called "Jackalope Days" the first weekend in June and also the January Jackalope Jump where area teachers and city leaders jump into icy waters to raise money for Special Olympics. The Chamber has also issued thousands of jackalope hunting licenses to anyone who applies on-line or requests one in writing. The jackalope season, however, is for a restricted period of time —June 31st from midnight to 2 a.m.

A curious thing is the name; why "jackalope" when most mounts (including the original) was done with deer antlers? The answer most likely lies in the relative scarcity of pronghorn sheaths and the decidedly awkward alternative "jackadeer." A few depictions use pronghorn horns, but antlers prevail on most mounts.

In the late 1800s, Ernest Thompson Seton once learned of a "horned prairie-hare" in the collection of L. G. Fisher of Chicago. Mr. Fisher was gracious enough to allow Seton to sketch the mounted specimen, but would not remove it from its glass case to be inspected. Seton remarked



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that the horns were not like the growths he had seen on cottontails, but instead looked like real horns. Perhaps Mr. Fisher also saw the humor in a horned hare mount.

### The legend lives on

Humans have always been interested in hybrids, or things that are half one thing and half another. This trend probably started before we had a written history. Tribal or clan elders from the beginning of time undoubtedly had stories containing strange beasts that possessed attributes of different animals. As humans progressed from oral history, to cave painting, to the written word, we continued to concoct more fake composite animals out of the unlimited number of possibilities. Greek mythology is absolutely full of these combo-critters generally referred

## Jackalope Natural History

**Scientific Name:** *Lepus cornutus* ("Horned Jackrabbit")

**Size:** 12-15" tall (add 8" for the ears)

**Weight:** 8-10 lbs. with empty belly

**Color:** Tawny and grey grizzled above with white underside

**Habitat:** Scrubby range with hiding cover, good grasses, and few people.

**Range:** Great Plains, Intermountain West, Southwest Deserts, Wall Drug

**Diet:** Prickly pear cactus pads, grass, mesquite beans, cholla bark, lost granola bars

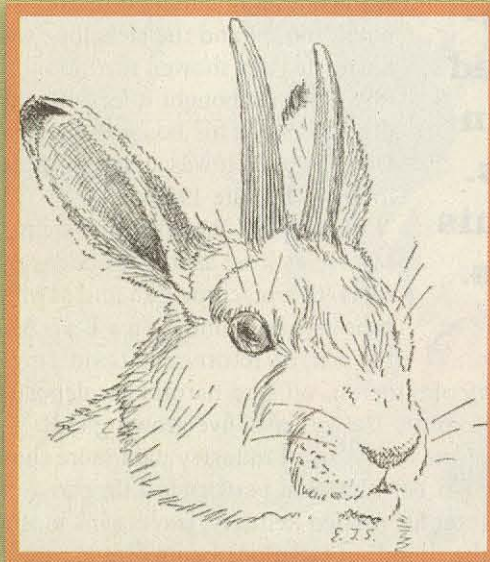
**Water Requirements:** None.

**Activity:** almost entirely nocturnal unless disturbed.

**Mating:** Said to mate only during lightning or hail storms. Males viciously defend estrus females.

**Physical Characteristics:** Able to leap small brush piles in a single bound, attain speeds that would frighten pronghorn, and has tremendous eyesight to see danger coming (said to equal 10X binoculars). Very adept at outfoxing foxes, and able to hold their own against coursing greyhound breeds.

**Predators:** Taxidermists, apparently not greyhounds.





to as "chimeras." Taxidermy seems to be the final frontier for expressing our creativity in animal combinations.


North America's jackalope has European counterparts that are almost as famous. (No one is better at spinning yarns than rural Americans.) In Germany, there's a rumored member of the native fauna referred to as the "Wolpertinger." The Wolpertinger is a rabbit with wings, antlers, and fangs. Mounted specimens are sold in rural areas as the locals try to pass them off as part of the local wildlife scene. The Swed- ish have a similar version that is part rabbit and part grouse called the "Skvader."

Besides the "unreal" combinations of animals, there is good documentation of real combinations of our big and small game species. Most readers of this magazine are by now aware of whitetail/mule deer hybrids, but there are many other species that can, and do, produce crossbreeds. Other combinations that have been documented are: brown bear-polar bear; mountain lion-ocelot; jaguar-leopard; bighorn sheep-domestic sheep; lion-tiger (Liger); coyote-dog; coyote-wolf; and of course the ubiquitous wolf-dog hybrids. In small game, Scaled quail sometimes cross with Gambel's quail resulting in what is called a "Scrambled Quail."

Douglas, Wyoming, may be the "Home of the Jackalope," but they can now be found far from home and seem to appear in the local fauna anywhere there's a market for their mounted heads. Even then-President Ronald Reagan showed off his mounted jackalope head during a 1980 media tour of his Rancho del Cielo (the "Western White House") near Santa Barbara, California. Not wanting to lie to the press, he simply

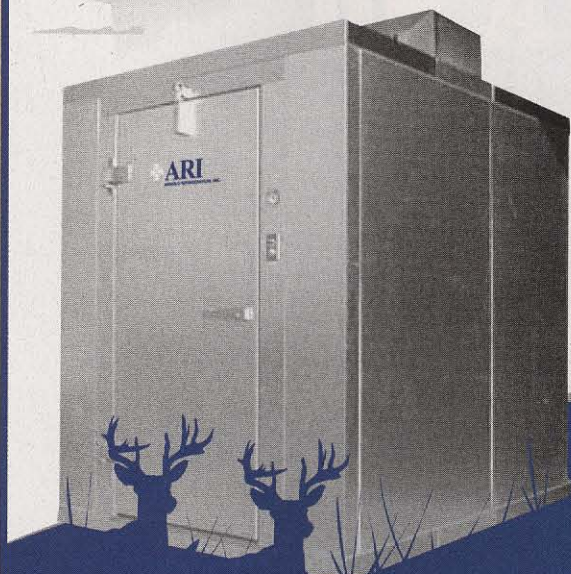
told them the truth—he, himself captured the creature on the ranch!

The closest relative of the jackalope is the antelope jack-rabbit (*Lepus alleni*) in Mexico and southern Arizona. With weights of 9 pounds common (12-plus pounds for pregnant females), it can easily pass for a small big game animal. It's certainly as big as some of the small antelope that are hunted with rifles on the African Continent. It's rumored that jackalope live among the antelope jacks because the females of both species are indistinguishable from one another. With the male jackalope so secretive, it's no wonder our information about them is confusing and poorly documented. I recently had the opportunity to accompany someone in the field who has a collection of jackrabbit coursing hounds. We were in prime antelope jackrabbit habitat, but were only treated to one chase that morning when a white flash in the far brush drew the dogs out like rockets. When the three hounds returned rabbit-less, we noticed the lead dog had a large bleeding puncture wound between the eyes and a tear at the base of the ear. I'm not saying she found a male jackalope, but no other explanations seem to make sense.

The wondrous jackalope is immortalized across the country in faraway places where tourists congregate. I've seen pictures of no less than 10 giant statues of jackalope throughout the country to commemorate this fantastic animal. That's more than Elvis and the Beatles combined. Keep your eyes open when in jackalope country and you just may be one of the few lucky enough to get a visual on one of the most famous and least understood animals in the West. 

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