



Tales from a Sisters Naturalist by Jim Anderson

The 'wabbit' of Camp Sherman

No... I did not tamper with that desert cottontail's ears, or Photoshop them; that's the way the photo arrived from Richard Skupa.

Richard wrote:

"About the latter part of July I would find a rabbit frequenting my lawn off and on most days. He seemed to enjoy the 'gourmet' clover in the grass, and he was not just any rabbit as he had four ears instead of two.

"I got accustomed to him, he seemed tame, as I would be able to walk up to within about 10 feet of him before he would 'rabbit' off into the shrubs. Thinking of the old Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd cartoon, I named him the '10 foot Wabbit,' as he would hide in the lilac shrubs, and I would be able to get closer and was able to see the two larger ears, which were the real thing, and the extra

smaller ears in front were just for show.

"After looking online, and finding this special feature has occurred occasionally in the North American continent before, I assumed it to be a rare mutation that may happen in nature. A rare find indeed..."

Then my neighbor Lynn "crYcKet" Woodward got into the discussion. She (like me) believes the ears may have been split by a very sharp tool moving at a very rapid speed — like a motorized or gasoline powered lawn mower with horizontal, revolving blades.

But then she suggested the oddity might be a result of "Jackalope fever" which was discovered in Iowa infecting cottontails — of which Wikipedia states: "The Shope papilloma virus (SPV), also known as cottontail rabbit papilloma virus (CRPV) or Kappapapillomavirus 2 (try pronouncing that one!), a apapillomavirus which infects certain leporids (rabbits), causing keratinous carcinomas (hair root sheath cancer) resembling horns, typically on or near the animal's head."

That said, the ears of Wabbit do not resemble anything like the keratinous carcinomas caused by cottontail papilloma. Which takes us back to the sharp blade theory.

When a cottontail goes into hiding out in the open it crouches down with its feet and legs under it. It pulls its head down on its front legs, flattens its ears tight against the top of its head and neck, closes its eyes and hopes that thing coming at it will pass by/over without seeing it.

If the cottontail is about a week old that escape maneuver may work without any painful or fatal circumstances, especially if the animal is crouched down at the edge of the lawn, lower than the grass. A mower could pass directly over the poor little guy without cutting it up into sliced rabbit.

If, however, the animal is caught out in the middle of the lawn and goes into the couched, defensive posture — AND — the mower is set to cut the grass very short, it's curtains. On the other hand, if the mower is set to leave several inches of lawn, the mover blades could pass over the little fellow and allow it to see another day.

Now think what happens if the mower is set to leave one inch of grass instead of two inches. The first — or perhaps only thing — the revolving blades will meet up with is the rabbit's ears lying tight on the top of the animal's head, parallel to the mower blades. To me, that's what I'm seeing in Wabbit. The mower blades sliced his



PHOTO BY RICHARD SKUPA

Richard Skupa's "10 foot Wabbit." Take a good look at those ears.

little ears thinner than they were as the mower went over him, leaving the appearance of another set of ears.

If you have any other theories, let's hear 'em. Send an email to jimnaturalist@gmail.com.

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