

RABBIT AND HARE HUNTING AMONG MONTANA SPORTSMEN^{TWS}

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The Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Nongame Program receives periodic inquiries regarding rabbit and hare hunting within the state. Rabbits and hares are classified as nongame species in Montana. In surrounding states, these animals are small game and considered valued game species. Little information exists regarding the hunting of lagomorphs in Montana. I initiated a survey to determine the interest and harvest levels among Montana sportsmen via a special rabbit survey coordinated with the annual Hunter Harvest Survey. A total of 1,408 hunters were interviewed. Eighty-five sportsmen (6%) responded positively when asked if they hunted or harvested rabbits during 1996. A majority of rabbit hunters stated they were hunting other game in combination with rabbit hunting (51%) while 41 percent were hunting specifically for rabbits. Most respondents who hunted rabbits in combination with other game were hunting deer and/or elk (41%) followed by upland game birds (36%). Carbon County was hunted most by those surveyed (13%), followed by Flathead County (7%), while Lewis and Clark, Madison, and Pondera tied at 6

percent of respondents. Sixty-eight percent of rabbit hunters surveyed harvested lagomorphs. Successful hunters generally harvested less than 3 rabbits (61%). Most rabbit hunters harvested cottontails (*Sylvilagus spp*) and/ or jackrabbits (*Lepus spp*). It appears that interest levels in rabbit hunting are significant in Montana. An equivalent number of sportsmen hunt specifically for rabbits and hares as those that hunt waterfowl, and rabbit hunter numbers approach those that hunt turkeys in Montana.