

## STATUS AND DISTRIBUTION OF THE PYGMY RABBIT IN MONTANA<sup>TWS</sup>

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Pygmy rabbits (*Brachylagus idahoensis*) were first documented in southwestern Montana in 1918. Historical distribution records are sparse at best, and concern over the status of the pygmy rabbit lead to a evaluation of its current distribution in Montana. The present distribution of the pygmy rabbit is defined and reflects historical distribution maps. Pygmy rabbits were present in all historical locations except one. Some evidence suggests a slight contraction in pygmy rabbit distribution. Habitat parameters are similar to occupied areas in other states. Big sagebrush (*Artemesia tridentata*) was slightly shorter in occupied sites in Montana and averaged 21.3 % coverage by line intercept method. In Montana, pygmy rabbits appear to prefer gently sloping or level floodplains where adequate sagebrush and soils exist. However, many different occupied sites have been located. Loss of preferred habitat through sagebrush removal is probably the greatest threat to the species. One calculated density in good habitat in Montana of 3.03 rabbits/ha is higher than reports from Washington and Oregon. Morphologically, pygmy rabbits are similar to those in other states with females weighing slightly more than males. Continued monitoring of the pygmy rabbit's distribution is recommended.