



New Distributional Records of White-tailed Jackrabbit (*Lepus townsendii*) in British Columbia, 1959–1962

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White-tailed Jackrabbit (*Lepus townsendii*; Figure 1), a native North American species, occurs primarily throughout the Great Plains region of western Canada and the western and central United States (Lim 1987). In Canada, the species ranges in open shrub-steppe from extreme south-central British Columbia, across the Prairies from southern Alberta and Saskatchewan to southwestern Manitoba, and extreme southwestern Ontario (Flux and Angermann 1991). British Columbia is at the northern periphery of its range where White-tailed Jackrabbit has been recorded only in the southern Okanagan and Similkameen valleys. Site localities here include Chopaka, Keremeos, Osoyoos Lake, White Lake, and Testalinden Creek near Oliver (Nagorsen 2005).

Recently, three unpublished records of White-tailed Jackrabbit were uncovered by RWC while cataloguing and searching historical field notes to update species accounts for British Columbia birds.

On 15 May 1959, GRR and his brother Donald decided to take a weekend trip from Surrey, BC, to Kilpoola Lake via Princeton, Keremeos, and Richter Pass. The latter location is a low mountain pass connecting Osoyoos in the southern Okanagan valley with Keremeos in the Similkameen River valley. The following day, while travelling by car from Keremeos to Osoyoos through Richter Pass in the late afternoon, they spotted a very large rabbit sitting in gravel at the edge of the main road. There was no vegetation and vehicular traffic was light. GRR immediately recognized it as a jackrabbit because



Figure 1. White-tailed Jackrabbit, a large greyish-brown hare, can be identified quickly by its size, all-white tail, and very long ears with black tips. *Photo courtesy Wikipedia Commons.*

of its size and long ears. He was very familiar with Snowshoe Hare (*L. americanus*) from his years living in Celista and the introduced Eastern Cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) when he later lived in the Fraser River valley.

Over the next couple of minutes the brothers could see the brown body that faded to white towards the belly, long white and brown ears tipped with black,

an all-white tail, and long front legs confirming it as a White-tailed Jackrabbit. It was a new mammal for them. As soon as the car moved the jackrabbit quickly scampered off into the open sagebrush plant (*Artemisia* spp.) and grass-covered hillside and was not seen again. The site was east of Richter Lake at 518 m elevation.

On 15 August 1961, GRR and Bernard Young, while travelling by car from Cache Creek to Kamloops, BC, saw three White-tailed Jackrabbits running quickly in a zigzag pattern across Highway 1 in front of them. The rabbits ran into nearby open sagebrush flat uphill from Juniper Beach Park (Figure 2) and one stopped by a sage bush about 10 m away. It was described as “a large light brown rabbit with very long legs and ears. The belly and undersides were whitish and the tail was pure white. The tips of the ears were dark, almost black. The eyes appeared to bulge and each had a partial white eye-ring. The front legs were skinny.” Later, GRR thought that it may

have been a family group but could not recall noting differences in sizes. The site was about 18 km east of Cache Creek at 421 m elevation.

While searching for bird nests and collecting eggs at the east end of Richter Pass on 2 July 1962, RWC and Ken Kennedy spotted a large rabbit with long ears darting among sagebrush on a grassy hillside above Spotted Lake (Figure 3). It stopped at the edge of a sagebrush plant and was watched moving each ear independently, frontwards and backwards. After about three to four minutes it ran away in a zigzag pattern uphill and disappeared. The hare’s all-white tail and long hind feet were clearly visible.

The White-tailed Jackrabbit was estimated to be about 0.6 m (2 ft) long by comparing it later with measurements of sagebrush branches. The body was grayish-brown above with a white belly. The feet were light in colour. The very long grayish ears were tipped with black; the front of the ears were brownish, the back side much lighter. A narrow white line rimmed



Figure 2. The shrub-steppe habitat near Juniper Beach Park, BC, consists of bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudoroegneria spicata*) and big sage (*Artemisia tridentata*). Photo by R. Wayne Campbell, 28 June 2004.



Figure 3. While searching old American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) nests for late broods of Long-eared Owl (*Asio otus*) at Spotted Lake, BC in mid-summer 1962, a White-tailed Jackrabbit was observed in the lower hills above the lake. The plant community consisted of open big sagebrush-bluebunch wheatgrass, a habitat the White-tailed Jackrabbit prefers. Photo by R. Wayne Campbell.

the rear edge of each ear. The eyes were large with an incomplete white eye-ring and the front legs were long and slender.

The three historical localities are new for the province although two sightings in Richter Pass are within the previously known range (Nagorsen 2005). The Juniper Beach record extends the historical range about 195 km northwest of Keremeos or 1.08° N latitude. All locations are below the maximum elevation of 600 m reported by Nagorsen (op. cit.).

In the 1920s and 1930s, White-tailed Jackrabbit was considered a pest in southern British Columbia but during the ensuing 50 years populations declined so that today it may be extirpated (Naughton 2012:238). The last record was a sighting at Chopaka, near the United States border, in 1981 (Nagorsen 2005:95), about 15 km southwest of the latest Richter Pass sightings. †

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