



The Katharine Ordway
Natural History Study Area
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MACALESTER
COLLEGE

ORDWAY
BULLETIN No. 55

located at 9550 Inver Grove Trail (Dakota County Road 77), Inver Grove Heights, Minn.

RABBITS at ORDWAY

Walking the roadway in late May produces a pleasant fruity fragrance as my boots crush the small lacy-leaved plants growing in the centerway. It is a reminder that the Pineapple Weed (Matricaria matricarioides) has emerged, indeed has already formed its small greenish peppercorn-sized flowerhead. This relative of Chamomile has finely-cut leaves and gives off the scent of pineapple when its stems are crushed and it grows abundantly in the crown of the roadway. It is a tip-off for the appearance of our frequent visitors at Ordway for shortly there will appear increasing numbers of the Eastern Cottontail Rabbit (Sylvilagus floridanus) who come to the roadway attracted by the dew-moistened plants.

Particularly in the morning and again in the cooling evening shadows they forage along the pathway, savoring the irresistible feed which grows there. It is not unusual to find as many as a dozen cottontails feeding in the roadway and by late summer they are apt to be at several stages of development, indicating the emergence of a second or third litter among the rabbit population. One interesting observation about these grazing rabbits is that the very small, young ones do not "flush" when one approaches them for they have not yet learned the use of speed and evasion but do instinctively "freeze" into their surroundings relying on their protective coloration; one can sally quietly within six inches of these little fellows without causing them to take evasive action; the next older ones tend to bound a step or two and then blend in while the full-grown ones bound away to some considerable distance and take cover. By late August a walk along the roadway produces a near-explosion of bobbing "powder puffs" taking cover in all directions.

When there is little activity around the building, even during the deepest winter there is always considerable activity amongst the rabbits, their tracks marking the freshly-fallen snow at sub-zero temperatures and the powder-dry dust of hottest summertime. Their "bunny trails" become padded down and easily traceable both winter and summer as they develop a maze of communication and foraging paths.

This year (1977) seems to be a near-explosion for the rabbit community perhaps because of the suppression of domestic dogs and cats from the property. Subject to the severity of the upcoming winter and other factors it is very likely that we will see a resultant balancing of the numbers of rabbits and I can imagine Ol' Fox is going to be just a little more active at Ordway this winter - more active and more successful, too.

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