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Notes on the Occurrence of Warts on Cottontail Rabbits

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NOTES ON THE OCCURRENCE OF WARTS ON COTTONTAIL RABBITS

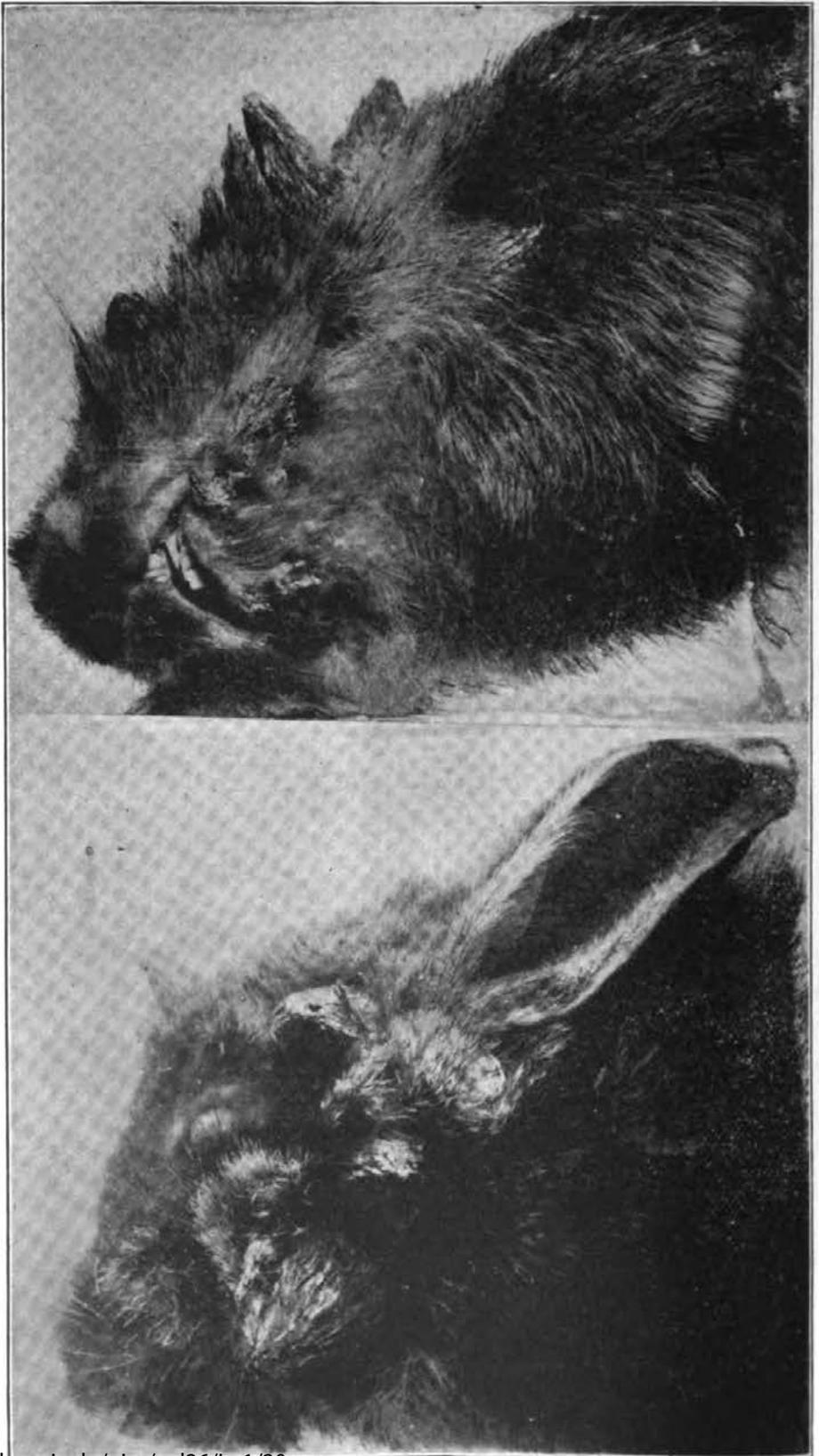
J. E. GUTHRIE

About twelve years ago my attention was drawn to some interesting epithelial growths on the head of a cottontail rabbit which was sent to the college by Mr. J. Schuyler Long, who wrote from the Iowa School for the Deaf at Council Bluffs. The head and accompanying letter were referred to Professor H. E. Summers, then head of the Department of Zoology at Iowa State College. The letter reads: "I am sending you a rabbit's head. . . . It has several curious growths which resemble horns. I have killed a great many rabbits but never saw anything like it before. I should be pleased to hear . . . as to the explanation of this peculiar formation. The rabbit from which the head was taken was caught in a trap by one of our boys. In all other respects it looked like an ordinary rabbit and exhibited no other peculiarities, except that on two places on the body were growths similar in color and texture to these horns, but not pointed. They were about an inch square or a little less, and were raised about 3-4 to 1-2 inch out of the skin."

The accompanying figures are photographs of this rabbit head. It has at least ten large horns, pointed rather acutely, conical in shape and reaching as much as an inch in length. The under lip bore some smaller, softer, branching ones as seen in the view from underneath.

No dissection or other critical examination of the head was made at the time, the specimen being merely preserved for the museum. Apparently it represented a rare condition for the locality.

After a lapse of eleven years the subject was again brought up by a letter from Mr. J. W. Runnels of Stone Park, Sioux City. In January of 1918 Mr. Runnels sent in a wart similar to those borne by the Council Bluffs rabbit head, accompanied by the following note: "The enclosed was firmly attached to the skin of a rabbit just back of the left ear. Previous to this we have found several small ones on rabbits, which hunters call warts. Kindly inform me what they are and if they affect the flesh for food, also if they would eventually kill the animal."



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Not having time then for the examination of the wart, and wishing more information on the cause, nature and effects, I sent the wart on to the Department of Animal Industry of the U. S. Department of Agriculture at Washington with a request for information. This was replied to by Dr. John S. Buckley, Acting Chief of the Pathological Division as follows:

"Replying to your letter of January 24, relative to a specimen of tissue taken from the head of a cottontail rabbit and forwarded to this office for examination, you are advised that histologic examination of stained sections of this material revealed the presence of a dense mass of hornified epithelium. Distributed at intervals through this tissue there were numerous dark pigment cells similar to those present in the skin of animals. These corneous developments are congenital malformations of dermal origin usually appearing as "horns" in the skin just behind the ears. In wild rabbits such growths are not infrequently encountered and are often referred to as "horns." Aside from some local irritation to the surrounding tissues, they possess little pathogenic significance."

Nearly a year later, on December 3, 1918, came a letter from Rev. C. Lillie of Persia, Iowa. Mr. Lillie says: "Should like to have some information regarding "warts" on cotton-tail rabbits. These "warts" appear on practically all older rabbits. They are but loosely connected with the outer skin, not showing at all below the skin. Some people claim that they indicate a disease, making the rabbit affected unfit for human consumption. Others say that they are produced merely by local irritation from sand burs, etc." Mr. Lillie's letter indicates what seems to be a pretty thorough infestation of the cotton-tails in the southeastern part of Harrison county.

Since that time I have made scores of inquiries among our students, but have found very few who had ever seen or heard of the occurrence of these growths. Two men of our faculty who have killed more rabbits around Ames than any others I know of, and have hunted elsewhere in the state as well, have told me that they have never seen anything of the kind. I talked with one student from one of the southeastern counties of South Dakota, and learned that in a day's hunting they usually find a few warted ones, and that they throw these rabbits away. He estimated the affected ones at about ten per cent of the cotton-tails. Another student reported having seen some warts around the ear bases of rabbits in Faribault county, in southern Minnesota.

Professor T. C. Stephens of Morningside College at Sioux City wrote that he had seen some reference to these warts in sportsmen's magazines in recent years, and that he had heard of one such rabbit being taken near Sioux City during the past winter, but that he had the impression that they were not common there. He kindly referred me to a paper on the subject by Edwin H. Barbour, in Proceedings Nebraska Ornithologists' Union, II, 1901, pp. 61-63, in which it is stated that four out of five rabbits taken in certain counties must be thrown away on account of these "horns."

I wrote to Dr. William T. Hornaday, a former Iowan, now Director of New York Zoological Park. As a hunter over many parts of this and other countries, a keen observer and a taxidermist, he would, I judged, be likely to know them if they were common. He replied, however, that: "In the matter of the so-called warts on cotton-tail rabbits I am obliged to confess ignorance and inexperience. I have seen nothing of the kind on any of our eastern rabbits, and the whole subject is new to me."

So far, I have been unable to obtain the paper by Mr. Barbour, but a letter from him states that "These horned rabbits are so abundant in southern Nebraska that it is wasteful. Hunters throw away the "spurred" rabbit. I have seen them with these spurs on all parts of the body, but they generally occur as a ruff around the nose and neck. These horns are sometimes three inches long. I was unable to find any mites in connection with these."

The whole subject of warts seems to be rather a mysterious one. So far as I have been able to find, the cause of the ordinary warts on the human skin is not well understood. It is stated that the blood from a wart will sometimes, but not invariably produce warts. Their appearance and disappearance on the hands and fingers of children seems difficult to explain. It is interesting to note that the only records so far obtained of the occurrence of warted rabbits in Iowa have been from the western border counties: from Council Bluffs in Pottawattamie, Persia in Harrison and Sioux City in Woodbury counties. The other regions that I have noted are southwestern South Dakota, southern Minnesota and southern Nebraska. It might be of interest to know whether there is any species of irritating bur or possibly some mite, tick or biting insect with a corresponding distribution. As to the statement that they are congenital, I have not yet been able to consult the evidence on which this is based. Perhaps it is sufficient.

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In bringing this to the attention of the Academy at this time it is my hope to get further data* on the occurrence, effects and particularly the causes of this peculiar malady of our rabbits.

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*Professor W. H. Davis reported that he had been told of the taking of a cotton-tail rabbit at Cedar Falls during the present season which was said to have warts similar to those under discussion.