

## The rabbits of Richmond Park

By Nigel Jackman

Rabbits were originally brought to Britain by the Romans to be bred for food. After being reintroduced by the Normans many of them escaped and became established in the wild. Once classed as rodents, rabbits and hares have now been re-classified into a separate group, lagomorpha.



Rabbits are a common sight in the Park, especially at dawn and dusk as they are "crepuscular". Look out for worn trails between their warrens and feeding areas, or you may notice a pile of rabbit droppings in a prominent place. This may be a communal latrine and territory marker.

You can find them distributed in many of the open grasslands (e.g. Petersham Park, Spankers Hill Field) and in woodland areas as well as on the roadsides between Richmond and Kingston Gates, near Robin Hood Gate and Holly Lodge road.

Rabbit food (grass, green plants and tree bark) is hard to digest so they eat it

twice! Their first soft droppings look like shiny grapes and still have high nutritional value. They eat these, and then produce the familiar dry fibrous spheres.

Rabbit guards are installed at planting times to prevent damage to newly planted hedges and saplings. However, rabbit grazing makes a positive contribution to the quality of the Park's acid grassland. They keep coarser grasses in check and the ground they disturb provides a seedbed for more diverse flora. Seeds are also distributed in their droppings. Maintaining patches of openness in grasslands is important, particularly where there are anthills. One way of telling if an anthill is active is to look for rabbit droppings and grazing.

Rabbits are prey to a number of predators including foxes so mostly live less than one year. Their numbers are sustained because they mature early and breed all year. A doe can produce 30 kits a year and they can reproduce within six months of birth. Without predation or disease such as myxomatosis, rabbit populations soar.

Myxomatosis still occurs in the Park, resulting in population crashes. Before 2016 the Park's rabbit population was extremely low. Present numbers, believed to be in the hundreds, are still relatively low, and rabbits have not needed to be controlled except in the garden enclosures where they cause damage by eating ornamental plants.

Enjoy watching these entertaining creatures all year round (not just at Easter!)

*Photo by Nigel Jackman*