

Sylvilagus mansuetus. By Howard H. Thomas and Troy L. Best

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Sylvilagus mansuetus Nelson, 1907

San José Island Brush Rabbit

Sylvilagus mansuetus Nelson, 1907:83. Type locality "San José Island, Gulf of California [Baja California Sur], Mexico."

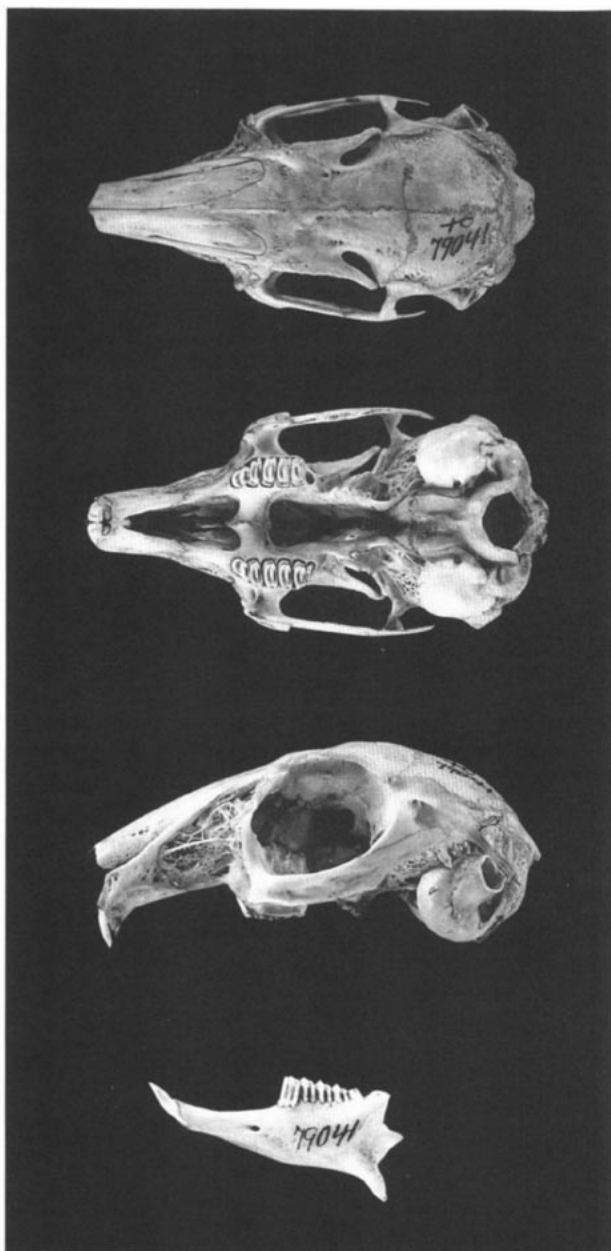


FIG. 1. Dorsal, ventral, and lateral views of cranium and lateral view of mandible of *Sylvilagus mansuetus* from San José Island, Gulf of California, Baja California Sur (female, United States National Museum of Natural History 79041). Greatest length of cranium is 64.1 mm. Photographs courtesy of the United States National Museum of Natural History.

CONTEXT AND CONTENT. Order Lagomorpha, Family Leporidae, Genus *Sylvilagus*. The genus *Sylvilagus* contains ca. 13 species (Wilson and Reeder, 1993). *S. mansuetus* is monotypic (Hall, 1981).

DIAGNOSIS. This insular species is a close relative of *S. bachmani* of the adjacent peninsula of Baja California (Hall, 1981). *S. mansuetus* is distinguished from *S. bachmani* by its paler pelage, larger ears (Nelson, 1907), proportionately longer and narrower skull, fusion of the anterior arm of the supraorbital process to the skull, and its larger jugal (Hall, 1981).

GENERAL CHARACTERS. In winter pelage, the top of the head and back are pale buffy or yellowish gray, and slightly darkened by unusually short black tips on the hairs. The sides of the body are paler and grayer than the dorsal surface. The ears are gray and the nape is dull and pale ochraceous-buff. The ochraceous-clay colored forelegs shade into a dingy white on the forefeet. The posterior surfaces of the hind legs are browner than the back, and the tops of the hind feet are white. The underside of the neck is paler in color than the sides, and the rest of the underparts are white (Nelson, 1909).

The skull (Fig. 1) has a long and narrow rostrum, and the supraorbital processes are broad and heavy. The postorbital processes are narrow and tapering, barely touch the skull posteriorly, and enclose the large oval foramen. The bullae are large and round, and the basioccipital is narrow and compressed by the bullae into a shallow trough-shape that is slightly constricted posteriorly (Nelson, 1909). Measurements (in mm) of one specimen are: total length,

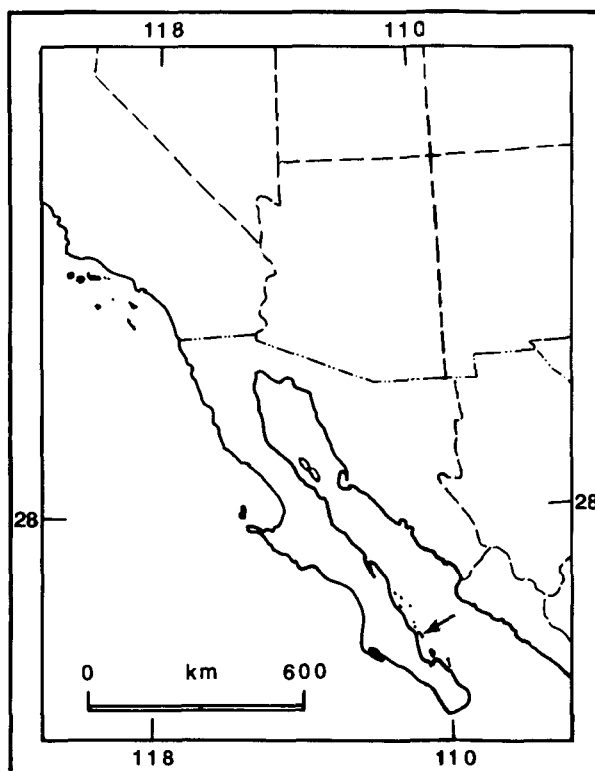


FIG. 2. Distribution of *Sylvilagus mansuetus*. This species is known only from San José Island (arrow), Baja California Sur, Mexico (Hall, 1981; Nelson, 1907).



FIG. 3. Habitat of *Sylvilagus mansuetus* on San José Island, Baja California Sur. Photograph by T. L. Best.

339; length of tail, 44; length of hind foot, 73; length of dried ear, 63 (Nelson, 1907); basilar length of cranium, 29.0; breadth of rostrum in front of premolars, 15.8; depth of rostrum in front of premolars, 13.0; interorbital breadth, 17.2; parietal breadth, 23.9; diameter of bullae, 11.5 (Nelson, 1909); greatest length of cranium, 64.1.

DISTRIBUTION. The San José Island brush rabbit is endemic to San José Island in the Gulf of California, Baja California Sur, Mexico (Fig. 2; Hall, 1981; Nelson, 1907).

FOSSIL RECORD. The genus *Sylvilagus* originated in the Pliocene (Dawson, 1967). No fossils of *S. mansuetus* are known.

ECOLOGY. San José Island is located immediately north of La Paz Bay and is separated from the mainland by a channel ca. 5–8 km wide. The island is >26 km in length (northwest by southeast) and ca. 11 km in greatest breadth. The island has many hills and low mountains, some reaching an elevation of >600 m. The shoreline is steep and rocky, and the mountain slopes rise from the sea except on the southern end, where the hills become low, and the coast is mainly bordered by a sandy beach. Sand beaches also occur at several places along the west coast. The vegetation of San José Island (Fig. 3) is similar to that of the adjacent mainland, but is smaller. Vegetation is most plentiful in the canyons and other drainages; the rocky higher slopes are barren (Nelson, 1922).

The mammal fauna of San José Island is more varied than on any other coastal island of Baja California, except Cedros. In addition to *S. mansuetus*, it includes *Odocoileus hemionus*, *Dipodomys insularis*, *Chaetodipus spinatus*, *Neotoma lepida*, *Bassariscus astutus* (Nelson, 1922), and *Peromyscus eremicus* (Hall, 1981). Common reptiles on the island include *Cnemidophorus tigris*, *Callisaurus draconoides*, and *Masticophis flagellum* (T. L. Best and H. H. Thomas, pers. comm.).

A survey to assess the status, population, and precise habitat

requirements of this species should be conducted. Rats and cats, which have been introduced to San José Island, may pose a serious threat to the survival of this species (Chapman et al., 1990).

Other than our observations of several *S. mansuetus* in the habitat shown in Fig. 3, nothing is known regarding its behavior. In addition, nothing is known regarding its physiology, ontogeny, reproduction, or genetic variation.

REMARKS. *Sylvilagus mansuetus* may be a subspecies of *S. bachmani* (Wilson and Reeder, 1993). *Sylvilagus* is derived from the Latin *sylva* meaning a wood and the Greek *lagos* meaning a hare. The specific epithet *mansuetus* is from the Latin *mansuetus* meaning tame (Jaeger, 1955); possibly referring to how closely the species can be approached.

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