



# What Falconers Need to Know about Wildlife Diseases

California Department of Fish and Wildlife  
Wildlife Health Laboratory





# RABBIT HEMORRHAGIC DISEASE VIRUS 2 (RHDV2) INFECTIONS IN CALIFORNIA WILD LAGOMORPHS

*Update for California Hawking Club*

*3/16/2026*

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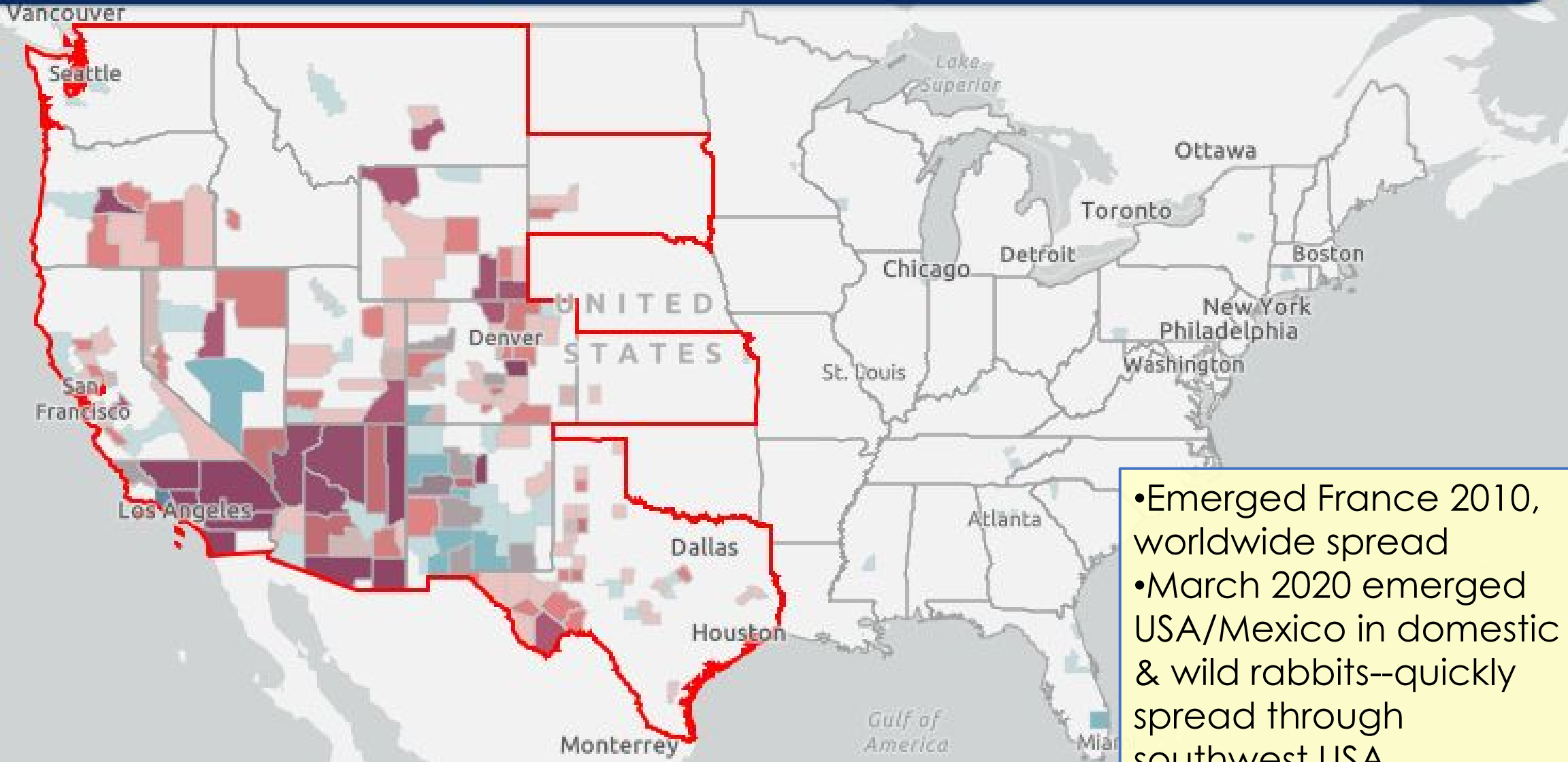
Nongame Health Biologist

**CDFW Wildlife Health Lab**

# CURRENT GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION RHDV2 IN THE USA



2020-24 Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Virus 2 USDA APHIS - Affected Counties as of March 31, 2025



- Emerged France 2010, worldwide spread
- March 2020 emerged USA/Mexico in domestic & wild rabbits--quickly spread through southwest USA



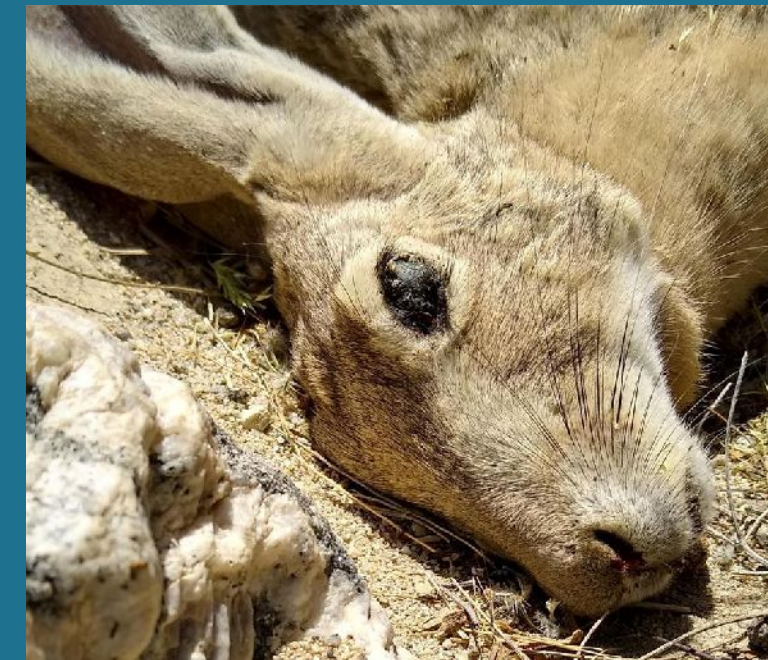
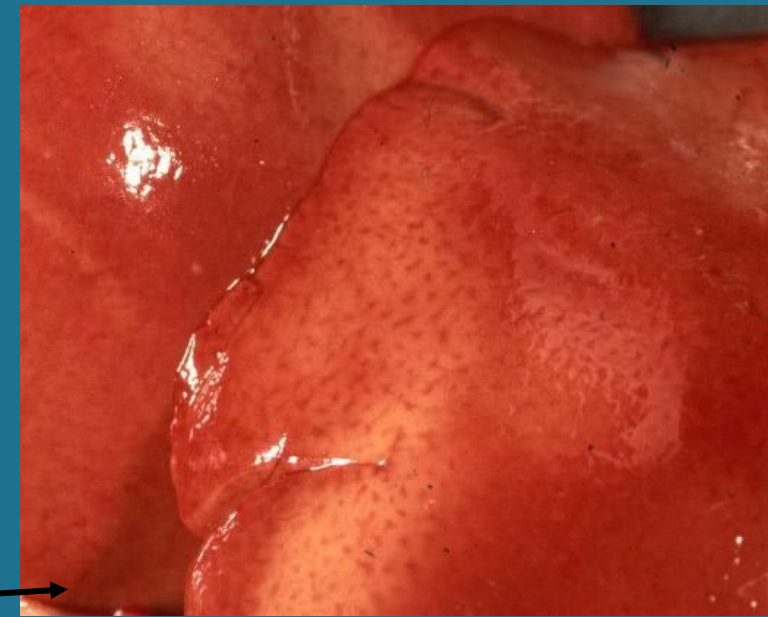
# RHDV2 SIGNS

## INDIVIDUAL ANIMALS

- Often found dead in good body condition
  - Disease is acute – kills within a few days due to internal bleeding, organ failure and liver cell death
  - Fresh or dried blood may be present nose, eyes, rectum, mouth but no obvious trauma
- If alive
  - Down, disoriented, neurologic (seizures, abnormal body position, incoordination)
  - Breathing hard, bloody or foamy nasal discharge

## RECOGNIZING OUTBREAKS

- Multiple dead rabbits found in an area in good body condition within a short time more likely to be RHDV2



Dead black-tailed jackrabbit, Palm Springs CA (ECORP) - 1st confirmed case, California, USA

# Why is RHDV2 a concern?

- 1) Many rabbit and hare populations already thought to be in decline & some endangered**
  - David Brown et al – declining trend based on hunt data in western USA (Western Wildlife 2018)
  - Climate change concerns and habitat alterations ex – white tailed jackrabbits, pygmy rabbits, snowshoe hares
- 2) Highly contagious, persistent in environment, affects multiple species & young individuals**
- 3) Possible impacts to predators reliant on lagomorph prey**
  - Reduced reproduction Spanish Imperial eagle & Iberian lynx after virus impacted prey.
- 4) Negative and economic impact for small game hunting and falconry**



# CDFW'S RHDV2 ACTIONS

- 1) EDUCATION AND AWARENESS
  - Website, answer every public rabbit report, media
- 2) TRACKING DISEASE SPREAD
  - Rabbit mortality web-based reporting
  - Continued testing – new counties & new species highest priority, but retesting if reports increase to examine long term persistence
- 3) ENDANGERED SPECIES PROTECTION
  - Multi-partner effort to protect endangered riparian brush rabbits in CA Central Valley
- 4) SCIENCE TO ADVANCE KNOWLEDGE
  - Validated new testing methods, tracking virus evolution, impact of conservation actions



Riparian brush rabbit photo by Moose Peterson

## Quick Facts About Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease

Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease virus type 2 (RHDV2) was confirmed in a wild rabbit population in California for the first time in early May 2020. RHDV2 is highly contagious and lethal to both wild and domestic rabbits, hares and pikas.

RHDV2 only affects rabbit species – it is not known to affect humans, livestock or pets other than rabbits.

If it spreads, RHDV2 has the potential to cause significant declines of rabbit populations in California, including the endangered riparian brush rabbit. You can help the California Department of Fish and Wildlife's efforts to fight RHDV2 by reporting sightings of sick or dead rabbits, and taking precautions to not spread the virus to new areas.

### HOW IS RHDV2 TRANSMITTED?

The virus is transmitted between rabbits through contact with other infected rabbits or carcasses, their meat or their fur, contaminated food or water, or materials coming into contact with them. People can also inadvertently spread the virus to new areas. The virus can persist in the environment for a very long time, making disease control efforts extremely challenging once it is in wild rabbit populations.

### WHAT SHOULD I LOOK FOR?

Infected rabbits, jackrabbits or hares infected may suffer swelling, internal bleeding and liver damage. Often, disease onset is rapid, so only dead rabbits might be seen. A rabbit that has died from RHDV2 may have blood on its mouth or nose.

### HOW CAN I HELP?

Sightings of sick rabbits, jackrabbits, hares or pikas exhibiting symptoms of RHDV2 – or any sighting of multiple dead rabbits – should be reported to CDFW. Do not handle or consume sick wildlife, or allow pets to come into contact wildlife carcasses. Although RHDV2 does not affect people or pets, other diseases that can (such as plague or tularemia) occasionally cause rabbit die-offs.

If you've been recreating outdoors, please take care to wash your clothing and disinfect your footwear and equipment before traveling to other areas or interacting with domestic rabbits. Footwear and equipment should be disinfected by washing in household bleach diluted 1:10 with water for at least 10 minutes before rinsing.

Hunters should wear gloves when field dressing rabbits, bury any remains onsite deep enough to prevent scavenging and wash their hands thoroughly when finished. Meat from healthy rabbits harvested by hunters is safe to consume when cooked thoroughly. Falconers should avoid flying birds in areas with known RHDV2 outbreaks, prevent their birds from consuming dead or diseased rabbits, and take precautions to sanitize gear between outings.



Please report sightings of sick or dead wild rabbits, jackrabbits, hares or pikas to the CDFW Wildlife Investigations Lab at (916) 358-2790 or file an [online mortality report](#) through CDFW's website.

# Tracking RHDV2 in California

- May 2020: 1<sup>st</sup> case in Palm Springs, CA
- CDFW “Rabbit Tracker”
  - 1,248 reports through 13 March 2026
  - 325 Carcasses tested; 97 detections
  - 25 counties infected (wild); 27 w/ domestics
- Infection confirmed in 3 native species



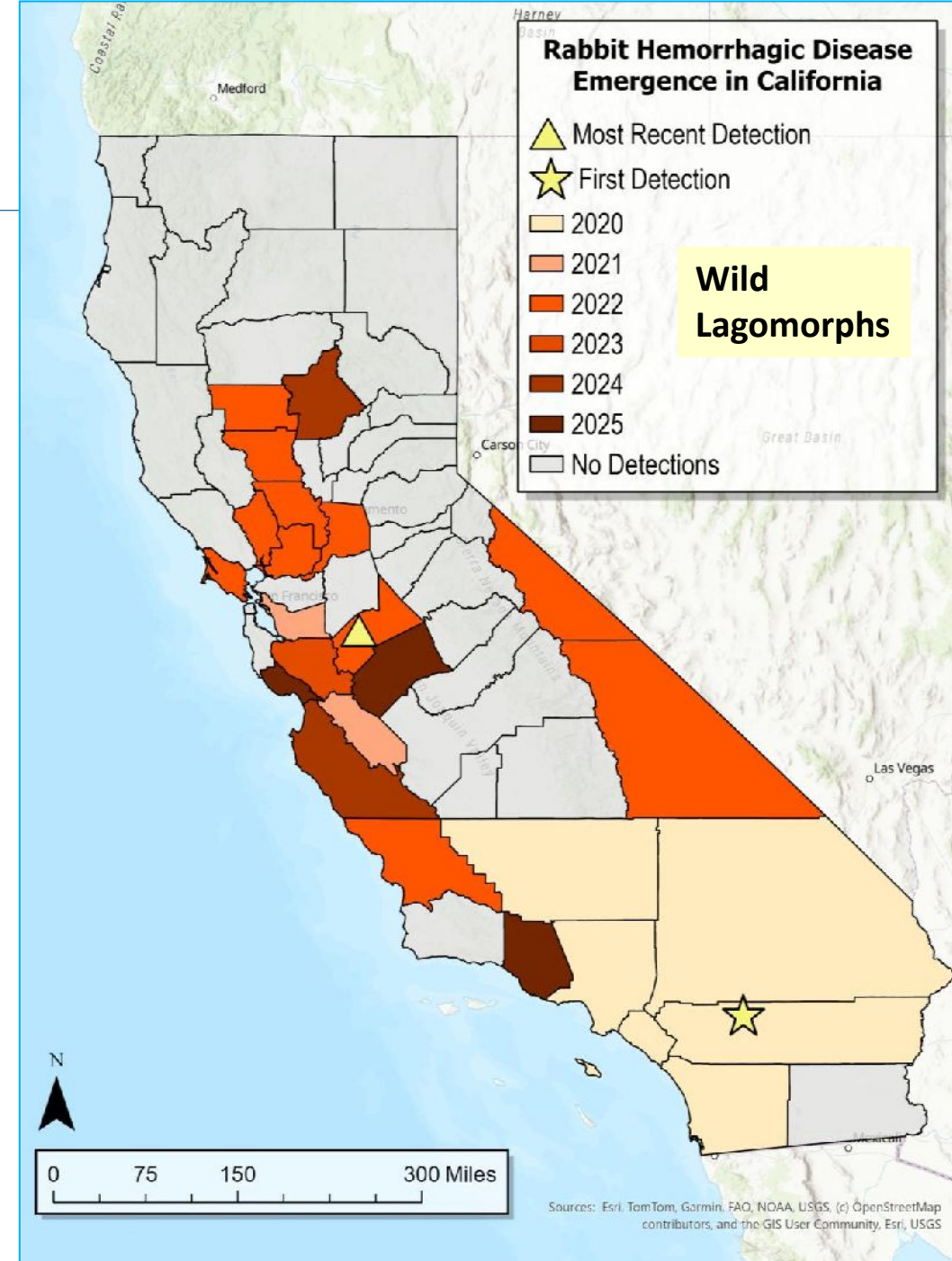
*Black-tailed Jackrabbit (NPS)*



*Desert Cottontail (Fumika T. USFWS)*

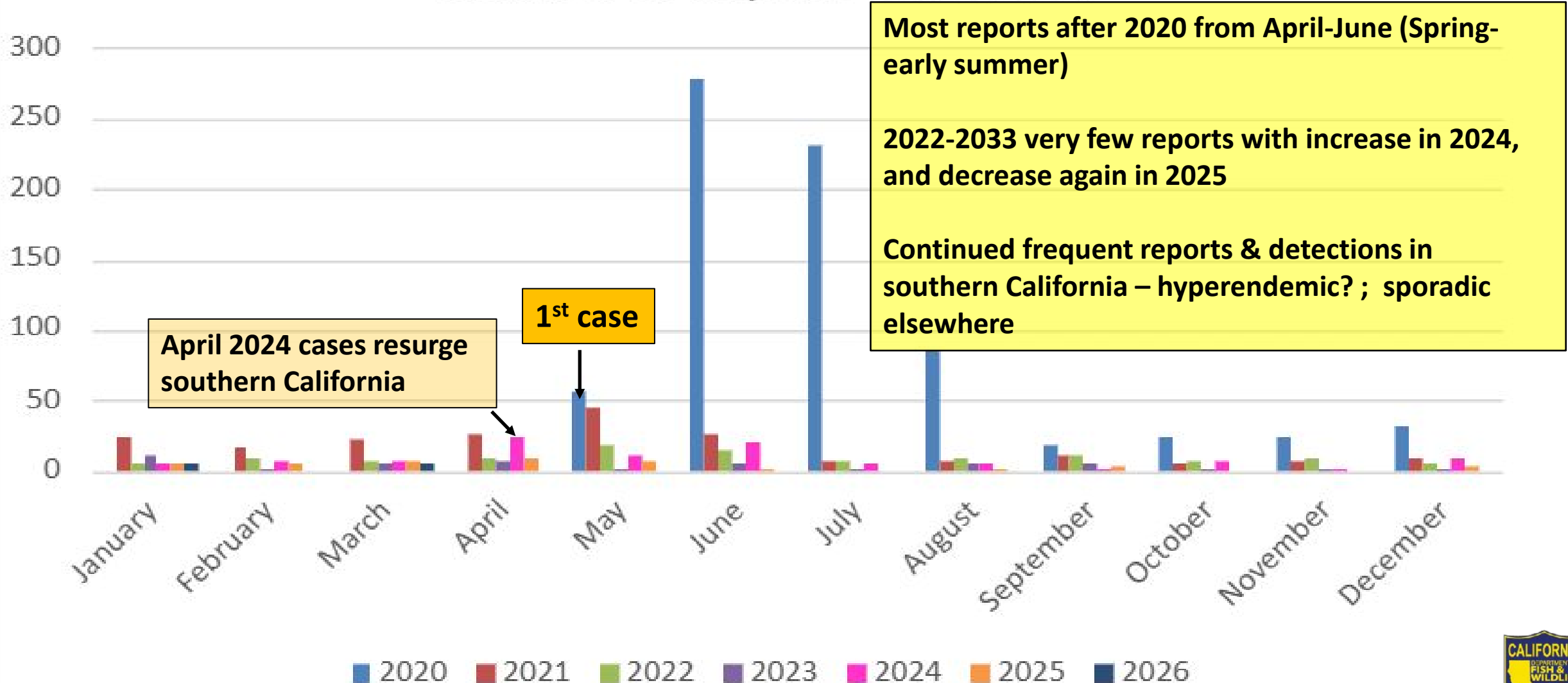


*Brush Rabbit (Fumika T. USFWS)*



# Wild Lagomorph Mortality Patterns in CA: 2020-Mar 2026

## Number of Reports Submitted



# RECENT RHDV2 DETECTIONS IN LAST 6 MONTHS



Free use: unsplash.com

- **FEB/MARCH 2026:** SJRNWR, Stanislaus Co. (RBR-endangered)
- **AREAS OF RECENT MORTALITY MARCH 2026 (NOT CONFIRMED):**
  - **Mojave Desert** near CA/NV border – multiple reports dead rabbits in past week (San Bernardino Co) – north of previous reports
  - Specimens being tested from Monterey Co (western brush rabbit) and El Dorado Co\* (BT jackrabbit)
- **AREAS OF INTEREST:**
  - Entire north state (CDFW Region 1)
  - Higher elevations

# HOW FALCONERS CAN HELP

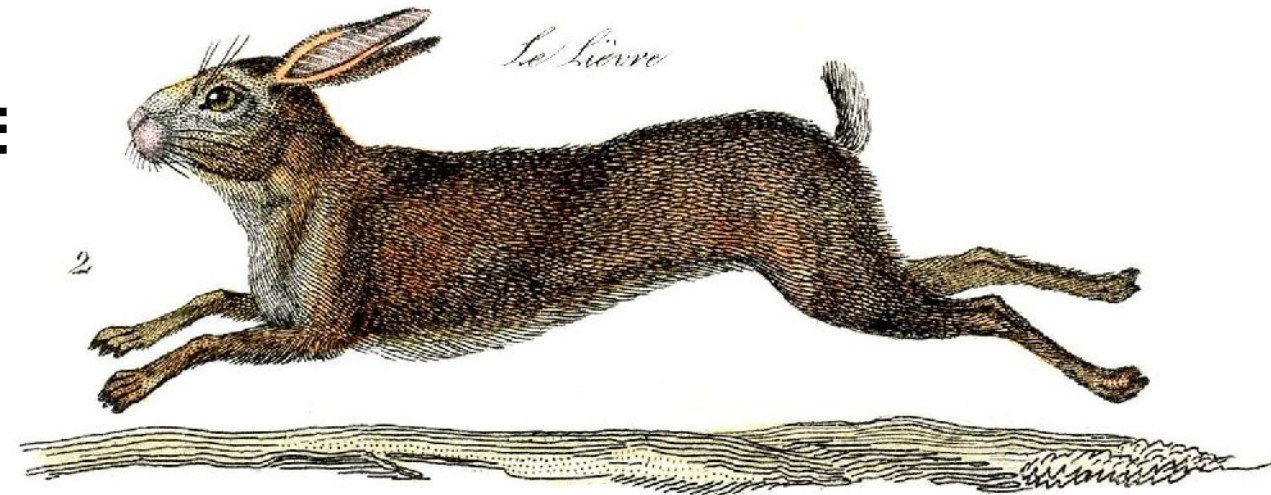
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## CASE DETECTION \*\*\*

- Please report any mortality events of > 2 rabbits
- Complete mortality report form or call – these are checked every weekday
  - [Wildlife Mortality Reporting](#)
  - 916-358-2790

## AVOID HUNTING WITH BIRDS IN ACTIVE OUTBREAK AREAS OR IF DEAD RABBITS ARE BEING OBSERVED

- Near real time information sharing



# HOW FALCONERS CAN HELP

## BIOSECURITY BEST PRACTICES TO REDUCE SPREAD

- Wear disposable gloves when handling carcasses\*
- Place remains in clean bag, sanitize then dispose in trash, or bury on site
  - Can weight to clean carcasses until home
- Cook rabbits to internal temperature of 165°F (74°C)\*
- Sanitize tools, equipment, and other items used to hunt/clean rabbits before/after contact

\* Also prevents tularemia transmission

Active Ingredients	Examples of Product Names	Contact Time (min)
Potassium peroxymonosulfate (1%)	Virkon-S (Lanxess Corp., Pittsburg, USA)	10
Sodium hypochlorite (0.5%)	Bleach diluted with water 1:10	5–10
Accelerated hydrogen peroxide	Prevail/Peroxigard (Virox Animal Health, Oakville, Canada) Rescue (Accel) (Revival Animal Health Inc, Orange City, USA)	2–10
Alkaline phenolic germicidal detergent (2%)	1-stroke Environ (Steris Corp., Mentor, USA)	10

Source: United States Environmental Protection Agency List O: Disinfectants for Use Against Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Virus, [www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov).

*Human–Wildlife Interactions* 17(3):342–360, Winter 2023 • [digitalcommons.usu.edu/hwi](http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/hwi)

## Falconer perceptions of, and support for, rabbit hemorrhagic disease biosecurity actions

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# DOMESTIC RABBIT CHANGES – WE'RE NOT ALONE



CDFA Programs ▾ AHFSS ▾ License Permits ▾ Animal Health ▾ Food Safety ▾

▾ **Movement Restrictions for Rabbits and Hares Entering California**

## Movement Restrictions for Rabbits and Hares Entering California

Due to the ongoing outbreak of Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease (RHD) in the U.S., California has implemented a statewide quarantine with movement restrictions for rabbits and hares entering California.

No rabbits, hares, or their products (meat, pelts, hides, carcasses, etc.) and equipment or other items or associated materials may enter California from states or countries where Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease (RHD) has been diagnosed in the prior 12 months unless they meet the following requirements.

[CDFA - AHFSS - AHB - Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease](#)

### Protecting Your Rabbit

- ✓ **Vaccinate**  
Vaccinate annually, especially in RHDV2-prone areas.
- ✓ **Indoors**  
Keep your house rabbits indoors, limit or eliminate outdoor playtime.
- ✓ **Avoid Playdates**  
Avoid letting rabbits play/interact with rabbits from outside your home.
- ✓ **Wash Hands**  
Wash your hands thoroughly before handling your rabbits.
- ✓ **Change Clothes**  
Change clothes and wash hands after contact with rabbits from outside your household.
- ✓ **Avoid Foraged Foods**  
Don't feed locally foraged plants, hay grasses, or branches
- ✓ **No Shoes**  
Remove shoes and disinfect after outdoor activities near wild rabbit habitats, using RHDV-effective disinfectant. Consider a blanket "no shoes" policy in your home.
- ✓ **Minimize Insect Exposure**  
Minimize your rabbits' exposure to flying insects. Mosquitos and flies, in particular. Make sure your windows all have secure screens.
- ✓ **Quarantine**  
Quarantine new bunnies being added to your household for at least 14 days.
- ✓ **Annual Booster**  
The RHDV2 vaccine needs to be boosted annually to remain effective. Don't forget to get your rabbits boosted every year.

[RHD - Rabbit.org](http://RHD-Rabbit.org)

# RHDV2 IS LIKELY HERE TO STAY



- Long term impacts unclear for California's rabbits
  - May be another stressor and limit size of some populations
  - Endangered species threat
  - A lot to learn about factors related to outbreaks like droughts
- Efforts focus on limiting human-mediated disease spread & conservation actions that conserve or enhance habitats for lagomorph populations

# Thank You

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