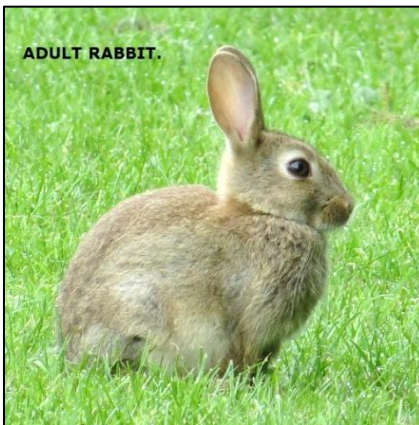


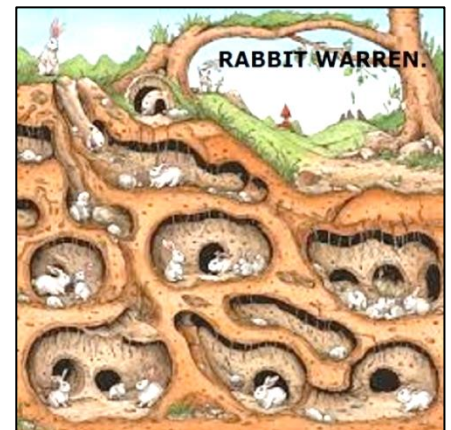
## THE RABBIT by Dave and Gill Shearing

Found all over the UK, Rabbits were possibly present before the last ice age but were probably wiped out by the cold. The Romans and possibly the Normans reintroduced them from Europe. The Normans farmed Rabbits, and they kept them in heavily guarded warrens, such was their value as meat and fur. Inevitably, some escaped and bred, and bred!



By the 1950's, despite, widespread shooting and trapping there were such high numbers causing crop damage that a virus was introduced called Myxomatosis. This quickly killed vast numbers of Rabbits and was spread by close contact in warrens by Ticks and Fleas. Myxomatosis is a very unpleasant virus in that it attacks the skin, eyes, lungs, liver and genitals of affected Rabbits. They die a lingering death over a week or more.

For a while the disease suppressed the numbers of Rabbits. Those Rabbits that survived did so by altering their behaviour. They stopped living in huge warrens with maybe a hundred Rabbits in close proximity and started living and breeding in smaller communities. This made it harder for the virus to spread. (Early social distancing!). Also, some Rabbits developed immunity to the virus.



The fall in Rabbit numbers drastically altered the landscape that they normally nibbled, having harmful effects on the rare Sand Lizard and the Large Blue Butterfly in particular. The Sand Lizard lays its eggs in South facing exposed sand and as there were very few Rabbits there were not the normally abundant sand scrapes made by them.

The Large Blue butterfly has a relationship with a certain Ant, which can only live in closely cropped turf. As a result, the Butterfly became extinct in the UK in 1979 until reintroduced successfully in 1983. Several birds including the Puffin and the Shelduck also struggled due to the lack of Rabbit holes to nest in.

