

Rabbit Tapeworms



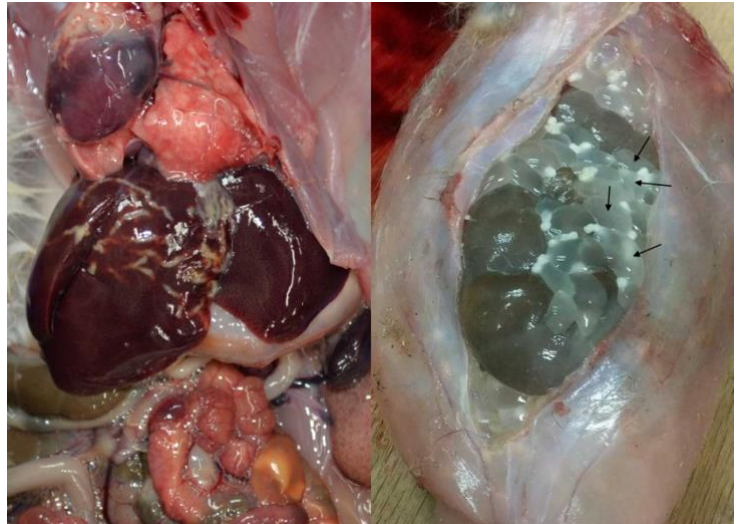
- Tapeworms are common parasites of rabbits that do not pose a risk to human health and should not be confused with other diseases such as tularemia.

Species Affected in Colorado

- Cottontail rabbit
- Jackrabbit

What to Look For

- Fluid-filled cysts, each containing a floating white dot, in the belly or chest of a rabbit or hare
- Thick, white spots or lines at the surface of the liver of a rabbit or hare



White lines at the surface of the liver (left) and many fluid-filled cysts in the belly (right) of rabbits with tapeworms.

Cause and Transmission

The most common parasite encountered by rabbit hunters in Colorado is the tapeworm *Taenia pisiformis*. As an adult, this worm lives in the intestines of wild carnivores such as coyotes and foxes. Feces of infected carnivores contain tapeworm eggs that are deposited on the ground and are eaten by grazing rabbits. Inside the rabbit intestine, immature tapeworms (larvae) hatch out of their eggs and travel to the liver where they can cause tracks of white spots or lines at the surface of the liver (left photo). Larvae eventually form small fluid-filled cysts (right photo) in the body cavities of infected rabbits. When the rabbit is eaten by a carnivore, the life cycle of the worm is complete. It is the small fluid-filled cysts, each containing a floating white dot (called a scolex) that hunters most often encounter. Other tapeworm parasites of rabbits that are less commonly observed by Colorado hunters include *Taenia serialis*, a parasite with a similar life cycle that forms firm nodules in the muscle and under the skin of rabbits; and *Cittotaenia variabilis*, a tapeworm that lives as an adult in the rabbit intestine.

Public Health Concerns

Rabbit tapeworms do not pose a risk to human health, but may cause intestinal infections if eaten by domestic dogs or cats. In cases of severe infections, the rabbit may have been ill and meat may be of poor quality. Tapeworm tracks in the liver should not be confused with tularemia, which may appear as pinpoint white spots throughout the liver (see CPW tularemia fact sheet). Always wear gloves and wash hands when handling wildlife, and never consume an animal you observed to be sick or dead. If you believe you may have been exposed to tularemia, contact your local public health department.

Additional Information/References

Taeniasis and Echinococcosis, in *Parasitic Diseases of Wild Mammals* (Authors: Arlene Jones and Margo J. Pybus)