

SCRIPT

NEW | The truth is lemmings 'have never been known to jump off cliffs'

Lemmings are active throughout the year, reproduce several times in the winter

By Jane Sponagle, [CBC News](#) | Posted: Feb 02, 2018 6:00 AM CT | Last Updated: Feb 02, 2018 6:00 AM CT



Iqaluit hunter and elder Ben Kovic said lemming fur has traditionally been used to heal the skin. (David Gunn)

Ben Kovic wants to quash any myths about lemmings.

"One thing everybody seems to believe (is) that they jump off cliffs when they're abundant. They don't. That's Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit (traditional knowledge)," said the Iqaluit hunter and elder.

Kovic stood on thin snow in an open space on the edge of Iqaluit. Grass and willow, some of the favourite foods of lemmings, poked through.

Lemmings need deep snow this time of year. Both to travel under and stay warm in -40 C temperatures.

"They have never been known to jump off cliffs in suicide," he said, referring to a scene from the 1958 Walt Disney documentary *White Wilderness*.

□ [CBC Archives: Where do all the lemmings go?](#)

In the film, lemmings throw themselves off of a cliff into the Arctic Ocean. The scene was staged, but it still led some to believe that lemmings follow each other en masse over cliffs to their death.

What are lemmings up to?

What lemmings are up to at this time of year is still a bit of a mystery to locals and researchers, but they are most likely reproducing.

The lemming population spikes then drops every three to five years.



A lemming is pictured in Iqaluit, Nunavut. The rodent is affected by climate change because increasing freeze-thaw cycles in the fall season mean it can't get to seeds or roots buried by ice. (Fiona Paton/Flickr)

"These population explosions start during the winter because lemmings

are active throughout the winter. They reproduce during the winter," said Gilles Gauthier, who is a professor at Laval University and has studied lemmings on Bylot Island since the early 1990s.

"They can have babies several times during the winter and that's what leads to these population build ups."

Iqaluit may have experienced a peak year in the summer of 2017, but Kovic says that won't be clear until the spring when lemmings emerge again.

Climate change and lemmings

Gauthier's research examines why the lemming population cycle is so dramatic and what would happen if it didn't occur, or was disturbed by climate change.

Foxes, snowy owls and other predators can usually survive a dip in the lemming population, where the next peak is three to five years away, he said.

However, Gauthier noted predators might have problems if the cycle stretches to six to eight years, adding this appears to have happened in eastern Greenland.



A brown lemming sits in the sun last summer on Bylot Island. (Submitted by Mathilde Poirier)

"There's researchers there studying lemmings for 20 years, and there are sites where they used to have good lemming peaks every three, four years and now it's been 12 years without lemming peaks," Gauthier said.

"Now the area is almost devoid of foxes, of many predators, that used to be present in this part of Greenland."

Lemmings are affected by climate change because they can't get to seeds or roots buried by ice when there are more freeze-thaw cycles in the fall season, Gauthier said.

Traditional use

Foxes and rough legged hawks rely on lemmings for breakfast, but lemmings also have traditional uses for Inuit.

Lemming fur was used to heal skin, Kovic said.

"If you have a big wart or a big wound they put it there to get the pus out of there. It keeps it from drying too much and it sucks out the infection of your cut or whatever disease you have," he said.



A lemming is pictured in Iqaluit, Nunavut. (Fiona Paton/Flickr)

He remembers his mother making a bag from sewing six or seven lemmings together.