

# Night of the Lepus

USA | 1972 | 88 minutes

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	William F. Claxton
<b>Screenplay</b>	Russell Braddon (novel "The Year of the Angry Rabbit") Don Holliday (screenplay) Gene R. Kearney (screenplay)
<b>Photography</b>	Ted Voigtlander
<b>Music</b>	Jimmie Haskell

## Cast

<b>Roy Bennett</b>	Stuart Whitman
<b>Gerry Bennett</b>	Janet Leigh
<b>Cole Hillman</b>	Rory Calhoun
<b>Elgin Clark</b>	DeForest Kelley

## In Brief

It's a fun start to the weekend with one of the oddest of the nature strikes-back genre that filled cinemas in the 1970s. A wonderful cast of cult stars (Janet Leigh, Stu Whitman, Rory Calhoun and Star Trek's DeForest Kelley) find themselves fighting for their lives, and for their town's survival, when a scientific experiment goes wrong and unleashes a horde of... giant, killer rabbits!

If the premise sounds ludicrous, that'll be because it is. Undeterred by the ridiculous nature of the story, the cast clearly took the film very seriously. You are under no such obligation.

Given the appropriate setting, many ordinary, innocuous things can be downright terrifying. Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* is a wonderful example of what happens when ordinary sea fowl go very, very wrong, while Lewis Teague's *Cujo* insinuates that the cuddly family pet may not be as cuddly as previously thought. Some things, however, just aren't scary. Unfortunately for *Night of the Lepus*, fluffy bunnies are one of those things.

*Night of the Lepus* attempts to be socially-conscious eco-horror, concerning an Arizona rancher, Cole Hillman (Rory Calhoun), whose lands are overrun with rabbits. Rather than putting out poison, which would disrupt the natural balance, Hillman calls a friend at the local university (DeForest Kelley) who puts him touch with Roy (Stuart Whitman) and Gerry Bennet (Janet Leigh), two scientists who specialize in ecologically friendly insect control. Attempting to control the rabbit's breeding cycle with an injectable hormone "serum", everything goes wrong when the Bennet's young daughter, horrified by the cruelty of the experiments, releases her favorite bunny back into the population. The result is the sudden appearance of super-rabbits who viciously attack nearby ranches and ravage the town, threatening to wreak their carnage all the way to Phoenix if not stopped in time. While *Night of the Lepus* aspires to be a provocative, informative-yet-terrifying horror film, all it manages is to be ridiculous. *Lepus*'s first flaw become apparent in the first half-hour of the movie, which drags on ad infinitum. As the minutes crawl by, we're fed images of stock-footage rabbit control in Australia, pseudo-scientific jargon, and even an overly long explanation of the horrors of prolonged rabbit infestation. This introduction, which sets the stage for the killer rabbit action, takes nearly a third of the movie. While set-up in a film like this is certainly necessary, *Lepus* takes it to excess. Not only do we now know why killer rabbits have appeared in the American southwest, we also know the entire history of rabbit control on two continents, the feelings of other local ranchers, and the importance of control groups in genetic experimentation. The biggest problem *Lepus* faces in its initial pacing is that it's trying too hard to be ecologically aware, taking the time to discuss, in depth, the ethics of animal experimentation, animal control, and messing with nature. I agree that introductions are important, but where are my damn rabbits?!

The poorly-timed pacing of the film is complimented by some of the worst dialog ever written. While normally I'd like to take my time and discuss the



## Trivia

- Lucky rabbit feet, with red paint ("blood") on the toes, were distributed as a promotion.
- The killer rabbit effects were created mostly by normal-sized rabbits running around on miniature sets. A man in a rabbit suit was used for some attack scenes.
- In an interview with film historian Tom Weaver, star Janet Leigh said she took her role because it was shot near her home, and meant less time away from her family. She also said "I've forgotten as much as I could about that picture."
- Posters for the film didn't feature any rabbits. Marketers feared that audiences wouldn't take the film seriously if they found out about the giant killer rabbits too quickly.
- The original title was 'Rabbits,' but MGM felt the title didn't suit a horror film.

# Night of the Lepus



cast's performance, there isn't much to say beyond, "Well, they did what they could." Sadly, that really isn't much, and given that the cast contains several well-known personalities, it's rather disappointing... With lines like "They're as big as wolves and just as vicious" and "Ladies and gentlemen, attention! There is a herd of killer rabbits headed this way and we desperately need your help!", the conversations and character interactions hardly resemble real-life relationships or situations, removing the viewer from the movie experience with thoughts of, "Did they just say that?" Coupled with character actions that make little to no sense (Hillman's going into the cave filled with giant bunnies to take pictures?), Lepus's script is more reminiscent of a college creative-writing assignment gone terribly awry than it is a horror film.

This is then compounded by an editing team that must have been doing some serious drugs at the time. Night of the Lepus boasts a heavy reliance on stock footage, yet Lepus's creators couldn't even be bothered to make sure that the added scenes matched the rest of the film. During the climax, a group of men have hidden themselves in the foliage and are shooting at the ravaging rabbits. Sadly, when the camera cuts to our stalwart heroes, we're greeted with a scene that looks suspiciously like soldiers in the Pacific theater of World War II. Another shining example is a scene where the rabbits are attacking a herd of cows in the dead of night. Unfortunately, it seems like the only stampede footage available was shot in broad daylight. Additionally, they reuse the same rabbit footage over and over again without shame. The same overgrown bunnies hop over the same cliff on more than one occasion and it seems the editing crew is just hoping we don't notice. Oh, we notice.

This laundry list of flaws, however, pales in comparison to Night of the Lepus's ultimate downfall. Fluffy bunnies just aren't scary. There might have been some potential for terror, despite the slow start, terrible script

and inept editing, if the monsters of our tale had been deformed, mutated or at least diseased. Instead, the killer rabbits are nothing more than your average domestic lagomorphs, shot in extreme close-up as they rampage across obviously miniature sets. Not even the imposing music helps, as the onslaught of ordinary bunnies hop their way across the screen in overdone slow motion. The hoped-for terrifying imagery is further damaged by the up-close and personal "rabbit attacks", which are obviously perpetuated by a man in a rabbit suit. Frankly, unless you're a carrot, Lepus and its killer rabbits are far more likely to illicit peals of incredulous laughter than they are starts and screams.

Inept scripting, a poorly disguised political agenda, and a ridiculous creature concept all make Night of the Lepus an excruciatingly long 88 minutes, barely redeemed by several moments of stupidity-induced laughter. If you choose to take on this movie, my advice is a bottle of vodka and your best snarking crew. Otherwise, you're probably better off with Wallace and Gromit in the Curse of the Were-Rabbit. At least Aardman Animation knows it's being silly.

edinBURGH  
FILM  
GUILD