

CHAPTER IV.

DOMESTIC RABBITS.

DOMESTIC RABBITS DESCENDED FROM THE COMMON WILD RABBIT—ANCIENT DOMESTICATION—ANCIENT SELECTION—LARGE LOP-EARED RABBITS—VARIOUS BREEDS—FLUCTUATING CHARACTERS—ORIGIN OF THE HIMALAYAN BREED—CURIOUS CASE OF INHERITANCE—FERAL RABBITS IN JAMAICA AND THE FALKLAND ISLANDS—PORTO SANTO FERAL RABBITS—OSTEOLOGICAL CHARACTERS—SKULL—SKULL OF HALF-LOP RABBITS—VARIATIONS IN THE SKULL ANALOGOUS TO DIFFERENCES IN DIFFERENT SPECIES OF HARES—VERTEBRÆ—STERNUM—SCAPULA—EFFECTS OF USE AND DISUSE ON THE PROPORTIONS OF THE LIMBS AND BODY—CAPACITY OF THE SKULL AND REDUCED SIZE OF THE BRAIN—SUMMARY ON THE MODIFICATIONS OF DOMESTICATED RABBITS.

ALL naturalists, with, as far as I know, a single exception, believe that the several domestic breeds of the rabbit are descended from the common wild species; I shall therefore describe them more carefully than in the previous cases. Professor Gervais¹ states "that the true wild rabbit is smaller than the domestic; its proportions are not absolutely the same; its tail is smaller; its ears are shorter and more thickly clothed with hair; and these characters, without speaking of colour, are so many indications opposed to the opinion which unites these animals under the same specific denomination." Few naturalists will agree with this author that such slight differences are sufficient to separate as distinct species the wild and domestic rabbit. How extraordinary it would be, if close confinement, perfect tameness, unnatural food, and careful breeding, all prolonged during many generations, had not produced at least some effect! The tame rabbit has been domesticated from an ancient period. Confucius ranges rabbits among animals worthy to be sacrificed to the gods, and, as he prescribes their multiplication, they were probably at this early period domesticated in China. They are mentioned by several of the classical writers. In

¹ M. P. Gervais, 'Hist. Nat. des Mammifères,' 1854, tom. i., p. 288.