

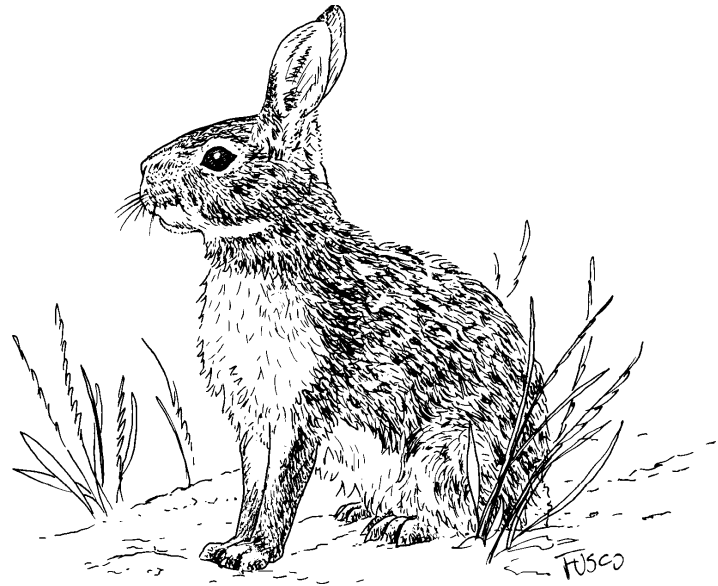
WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

INFORMATIONAL SERIES

COTTONTAIL RABBITS

New England Cottontail:
Sylvilagus transitionalis

Eastern Cottontail:
Sylvilagus floridanus



Habitat: Edges of open fields and meadows, areas of dense high grass, in wood thickets, along fence rows, forest edges, and the borders of marshy areas.

Weight: New England cottontail: 1.64-2.94 pounds; eastern cottontail: 1.8-2.95 pounds.

Length: New England cottontail: 14.2-18.8 inches; eastern cottontail: 14.8-18.0 inches.

Food: In summer, cottontails feed almost entirely on tender grasses and herbs; crops such as peas, beans, and lettuce are also eaten. In winter, bark, twigs, and buds of shrubs and young trees are eaten. Rabbits will also re-ingest their own fecal pellets, increasing their level of vitamins and minerals.

Identification: The cottontail rabbit is a somewhat stocky animal with large hind feet, long ears, and a short, fluffy tail that resembles a cotton ball. Its long, coarse coat varies in color from reddish-brown to a black or grayish-brown. The underparts are white. The New England cottontail and the eastern cottontail are almost identical in appearance, except for a slight variation in color. About half of the eastern cottontail population show a white, star-like shape on the forehead while none of the New England cottontails exhibit this trait. A comparison of the skull characteristics is the most reliable way to distinguish the two species.

Range: New England cottontail: New England west to the Hudson River and south down the Appalachian Mountains. Eastern cottontail: eastern United States and southern Canada south to eastern Mexico and into Central America; another population in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. The eastern cottontail is more abundant and is expanding its range, while the New England cottontail's range is diminishing.

Reproduction: Breeding occurs from March through early fall. Females do not dig their own nest burrows, but rather scratch out a slight depression in the ground in an area of dense grass for concealment. The nest is lined with fur and dry grass. The gestation period is about 28 days. There are usually two to four litters per year with about three to eight young per litter. Young rabbits are born blind, naked, and helpless but grow rapidly, leaving the nest after only two to three weeks. They are weaned and totally independent at four to five weeks. On the average, 15% of the young will survive their first year. Adults are usually solitary by nature except when a female is caring for its young.

Interesting Facts: Cottontail rabbits are active all year long, foraging mainly at night. During the day they remain concealed in dense brush, protected from predators and harsh weather. In times of extreme weather conditions or to escape predators, rabbits will readily utilize an abandoned woodchuck burrow for protection. A rabbit's home range varies greatly with the

quality of habitat, but generally averages about three acres for females and eight acres for males.

Cottontails have very keen sight and hearing. When danger is sensed, the animal will usually freeze in place until the danger has passed, but they will flush readily if approached too closely. Rabbits normally move slowly in short hops or jumps, but when frightened they can achieve speeds up to 18 miles per hour over a short distance. They often zig-zag to confuse a pursuing predator. Although they do not take to the water often, rabbits are good swimmers. They will thump the ground with their hind feet regularly, probably as a means of communication. When playing, breeding, or fighting they often make low purring, growling, or grunting sounds. If captured by a predator, the animal may produce a loud, shrill scream.

Because of its high productivity rate, the cottontail rabbit is an important link in the food chain and a principle prey item for many species. It is also a popular game species throughout its range. Depending on its availability, the cottontail can be considered a buffer prey species, meaning if rabbit numbers are high, predators will concentrate on them, thus reducing the pressure on other prey species.

History in Connecticut: The eastern cottontail was introduced into New England in the late 1800s and early 1900s and since has been expanding its range, outcompeting the native New England cottontail for its habitat. In the mid-1930s, New England cottontails were still considered abundant and more numerous than the eastern cottontail. However, as agricultural areas reverted back to forest and these forests matured, populations of both species were reduced. Presently, the eastern cottontail is now the predominant species.

Management of Nuisances: Cottontail rabbits often cause problems by browsing garden crops or chewing on shrubs and trees. Rabbit browsing can be distin-

guished from deer browsing by looking at the clipped-off end. A rabbit will leave a clean, angled cut while a deer will leave a rough, jagged cut. Browsing and debarking by rabbits usually does not extend more than 2 1/2 feet above the ground or snow line.

Cottontails can be restricted from gardens and other areas by erecting a 3-foot high fence with two-by-two inch mesh. They are not good climbers or diggers but to discourage other animals from feeding in the garden, a 1-foot extension can be added to the top of the fence and bent outward at a 90-degree angle. Also, a 1-foot extension should be added underground to discourage burrowing animals. Existing deer fences can deter rabbits by attaching a small mesh wire fence to the lower part of the deer fence.

Individual trees and shrubs can be protected by wrapping plastic tubing or 1/2-inch mesh wire around the trunk. These guards should be loose-fitting, extend below the ground about four inches, and be at least two feet above the average snow depth.

There are chemical taste and odor repellents available from many lawn and garden stores. These repellents offer only a limited amount of protection and usually have to be reapplied at regular intervals, especially following a rain storm.

Live-trapping rabbits can help control rabbit problems to a certain extent, however, captured animals may soon be replaced by others moving into the area. Trapping is best done during the winter or during rainy, foggy nights in the warmer months. Bait traps with a combination of apples, carrots, and rabbit droppings. Trapped animals should be released as soon as possible in suitable habitat at least five miles from the capture site.

Hunting is also a means of control. Check state and local regulations before shooting any animal on your property.



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