

Wild Things in Your Woodlands

Cottontail Rabbit



Two species of cottontails are present in New York and both are very similar in appearance. The first is the Eastern cottontail (*Silvilagus floridanus*), which is abundant throughout much of New York State except the central Adirondacks. In contrast, the New England cottontail (*Silvilagus transitionalis*) is uncommon and occurs only east of the Hudson River. The New England cottontail is a species of special concern in New York State because its distribution and abundance have declined significantly over the last 40 years.

Both of these rabbits are mostly gray-brown in color, with white undersides and a small white tail that looks like a cotton ball and is most visible as they bound away. They are about 14 ½ to 18 inches in length, and weigh about two to three pounds.

As you walk along a woods edge in the winter, the sights and sounds of wildlife activity are not as obvious as in other seasons. The tracks of the cottontail rabbit, or the occasional glimpse of a rabbit bounding for cover, remind us that some of New York's mammals are still active. The woods are quiet and peaceful during winter, and the lure of finding tracks, scat, or other signs of wildlife is added incentive to venture outdoors and enjoy what nature has to offer.

Like tracks and droppings, shrubs and seedlings with cleanly nipped twigs about 2 feet off the ground are evidence that rabbits are nearby. Rabbits are herbivores, feeding on bark and twigs of species such as sumac, oak, dogwood, maple, willow, apple, and raspberry during the winter. In the spring and summer rabbits feed on goldenrod, clover, chickweed, dandelions, and many other plants, eating the more succulent vegetation parts such as leaves, shoots and flowers. Rabbits are crepuscular, meaning that they feed most actively at dawn and dusk.

As the weather starts to warm in late February or March, rabbits entertain us with their wild, leaping courtship antics prior to breeding. Breeding starts in February and continues

into September. After a gestation period of about 28 days, from three to seven young are born. The young, hairless with eyes closed, are born in a nest consisting of a shallow depression in the ground lined with hair pulled from the female's belly and dead grasses. They nurse and require parental care for about 20 days after birth. A mature, healthy female can have as many as five litters per breeding season. Although a single female could contribute as many as 35 young to the population each year, only about 20 – 25 percent of the young survive a full year. Predators, weather, disease, parasites, and social factors keep populations in check.

Male cottontails are territorial and dominant males maintain territories of about eight to 25 acres. Other males can remain in the area as long as they remain subordinate, and respect the social hierarchy. Females defend a territory of about two acres in the nesting season. When local densities are high, frequent social interactions can increase stress and lead to reductions in litter sizes and survival rates.

Creating habitat for rabbits is relatively easy. Rabbits need nesting cover in the spring and summer, and food and escape cover throughout the winter. By leaving the tops of trees cut for firewood or during a timber harvest, you can provide food at ground level as well as cover. Crooked or forked evergreens can be partially cut through and toppled over to provide “living brush piles”. After the holidays, consider placing your Christmas tree out in the woods instead of sending it to the landfill. Create clusters of old Christmas trees by overlapping this year's tree with last year's tree. You can also create brush piles by placing large rocks or logs on the ground, and adding progressively smaller pieces of wood as you build up. By criss-crossing larger logs on the bottom, you create hiding spaces and prevent the pile from decaying too quickly. Old rock walls and stumps left in the ground are also beneficial. With just a few small habitat improvement projects, you can satisfy the food and cover needs for cottontail rabbits and enjoy both the springtime antics and the winter signs that are the hallmark of this animal.

Kristi Sullivan coordinates the Conservation Education Program at Cornell's Arnot Forest. More information on managing habitat for wildlife, as well as upcoming educational programs at the Arnot Forest can be found by visiting the Arnot Conservation Education Program web site at www.arnotconservation.info

Cottontail rabbit photo courtesy of
National Park Service