



New England Cottontail

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Since 2023 is the year of the rabbit according to the Chinese zodiac, it may be interesting to learn about the ones we see in our yards and natural landscapes. Connecticut has two species of rabbits, the New England and eastern cottontails. The New England cottontail is the only native species. Its historical range covered all of Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, eastern parts of New York, southern New Hampshire and Maine and a sizable area of Vermont. Presently, none are present in Vermont with small, scattered populations in the other states although their range is a bit more extensive in Connecticut. As of 2022, it was estimated that only about 13,000 New England cottontails remain.

Eastern cottontails are widespread throughout the eastern US and southern Canada down to Texas, Mexico and Central America. In the late 1800s or early 1900s, they were introduced to New England and their population has been on the rise ever since while the New England cottontails' numbers are decreasing.



Photo by M. Poole, USFWS

Both rabbits look quite similar with their reddish to greyish brown fur, fluffy white tail and their similar sizes and weights. About half of eastern cottontails, however, have a white star-shaped marking on their foreheads.

Their diet and life history are very similar as well. During the growing season, both species feed on grasses, herbaceous plants and leaves. Rabbits happily munching on lettuce, beans and peas in our gardens are most likely the eastern cottontails. As winter approaches, diets of both switch to woody plant parts including bark, buds and stems. They may devour seedlings of birch, maple, aspen and other hardwoods as well.

Breeding season starts in March and continues into early fall. Females can have 2 to 4 litters each year with 3 to 8 young per litter. Typically the mother rabbits make a depression in the earth in a well-hidden, area of dense grass. After a 28-day gestation period, the young are born blind and naked, but they grow rapidly and are ready to leave the nest in 2 to 3 weeks. In just 4 to 5 weeks, they will be fully weaned and on their own. Sadly, only about 15 % of rabbits make it through their first year.

Where these two species really differ is in their habitat requirements. Eastern cottontails inhabit more open spaces such as fields, meadows and even our backyards and gardens. It is thought that since their eyes are slightly bigger than the New England cottontail, that they are better able to see danger coming in these open areas and therefore, try to allude it.

The New England cottontail, however, needs large areas of brushy shrubland or young forests. If you would have a hard time walking through these areas because of thick, shrubby or viny growth, it would be the perfect habitat for this species of rabbit. Loss of habitat is a major contributor to the decline of this species, along with development, and competition from eastern cottontails. Younger forests that began growth as agricultural activities across the states decreased have since matured and their understory became too sparse to meet the New England cottontail's shrubby habitat requirements that provide shelter and escape from predators. In 2006, it was noted that the New England cottontail was in considerable decline with only 5 smaller populations found in New England and New York and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service designated this species for threatened or endangered status. The New England Cottontail Initiative (www.newenglandcottontail.org) was formed in 2009 with the purpose of developing a range wide conservation strategy to restore habitat and reverse the decline of this species. Wildlife researchers in Connecticut had been concerned about the New England cottontail and had begun documenting its distribution since 2000 and were ready to contribute their efforts to the Initiative.

In an unprecedented show of cooperation, federal, state, non-governmental organizations, universities, and private landowners have succeeded in enhancing habitat for New England cottontails on 700 acres of public land and 600 acres of private land throughout the region. This same habitat benefits about 50 other high priority species including ruffed grouse, woodcocks, box and spotted turtles and Hessel's hairstreak butterfly. Not only was required habitat being created but a captive breeding program was also set up.

This show of achievements convinced the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in 2015 not to list the New England cottontail for protection under the Endangered Species Act. Unfortunately, the one-time evaluation tool (PECE) that was used precludes future evaluations and just assumes

that the conservation efforts undertaken are working and will continue to work to improve habitat and increase population of the animal of concern.

Sadly, range-wide occupancy surveys that were taken from 2016-2019 indicate a significant (50%) decrease in New England cottontail population distributions. Even coordinated conservation efforts are falling short of the needs of this species in the face of development, fragmentation, lack of suitable habitat, predation and competition. It is short-sighted that species can't be evaluated at prescribed intervals and not just dropped as candidates for the Endangered Species Act.

The New England cottontail is a vital part of our New England ecosystems. Visit the New England Cottontail Initiative website to find out how you can help with conservation efforts of this iconic species. For your gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.