



Lesson 2: Young Forest Wildlife: New England Cottontail

Theme

Focusing on conserving one “umbrella” species can help protect many other animals that utilize their same habitat. It is important to maintain habitat that supports our native species so that they can continue to thrive in Rhode Island.

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, students will learn about how the unique characteristics of a young forest support a wide range of species. Students will also learn that in order to conserve young forest wildlife, we must protect and maintain the unique habitat on which they rely. Students will be aware of how the RIDEM Division of Fish & Wildlife helps protect Rhode Island’s natural resources.

Corresponding Activities for this Lesson

- Forest Succession Dance
- Invasive Species Game

Materials

- Young Forest Wildlife PowerPoint
- Invasive Species Game cards
- Bobcat pelt/skull replica
- Laminated black racer shed
- Cottontail rabbit skull replica
- Deer vs. rabbit browse display case

Lesson

1. **Explain to students that today we will be learning about young forest wildlife and how biologists at the RIDEM Division of Fish and Wildlife are helping to protect the habitat that supports them.**
 - Just like people, forests age overtime, and during the different stages of life, called stages of “succession” they support different kinds of wildlife. Forests can look very different depending on the type and age. Some are open with tall trees, these are very old, “mature” forests and others are so thick you can barely walk through, these are “young” forests!
2. **For younger students, run through the Forest Succession Dance activity. Older students could also do the activity, or could solely review the stages of forest succession in the Powerpoint.**



- 3. Ask students which animals they think might live in a young forest, then reveal the slide with pictures of young forest wildlife species.**
 - Explain that many animals use young forests because they provide a safe place to hide from predators with their thick and tangled brush and lots of food in the form of berries and other plants.
 - Show students bobcat pelt/skull and black racer snake shed, allowing them to gently handle the items.
 - In this lesson, we will be learning about the New England cottontail.
- 4. Ask students what they think wild rabbits eat? Show the first slide about the New England cottontail.**
 - Spring & summer: Rabbits eat grasses, clover, sprouts, dandelion
 - Autumn & winter: Rabbits eat buds, stems, apple/birch bark
- 5. Ask students what would eat a rabbit, then reveal the rabbit predator slide.**
 - Fisher, coyote, mink, fox, and raptors (birds of prey) all eat rabbits!
- 6. Ask students why they think young forests are good habitat for rabbits?**
 - Protection from predators, places to eat and places to rest!
- 7. Show the slide comparing New England vs. eastern cottontails. Ask students if they can spot any differences between photos on the slide. Show students the rabbit skull replica.**
 - New England cottontails are a native species. They belong in Rhode Island and have been here forever.
 - Eastern cottontails were introduced for hunting stock from the southern United States; they are invasive species. They were introduced to an area where they don't belong.
 - Eastern cottontails are bigger and use the food and shelter that New England cottontails need.
- 8. Play the Invasive Species Game to demonstrate problems with invasive species.**



9. Explain to students that to help the New England cottontail, the RIDEM Division of Fish and Wildlife is working with partners to help boost and monitor New England cottontail populations.

- There is a captive breeding program in which rabbits are bred in zoos then introduced to the wild, first in protected outdoor pens and then released to join wild populations across New England.
- Some wild rabbits are trapped on Patience Island in Narragansett Bay and introduced to mainland populations. These rabbits get special collars that allow biologists to see where they go. They use big antennae to track the collars and learn more about the rabbits.
- The RIDEM Division of Fish and Wildlife is working with the University of Rhode Island to locate any populations of New England cottontails in Rhode Island by performing pellet surveys. This is where volunteers and biologist pick up rabbit pellets and use genetic testing to see if it belongs to New England or Eastern cottontail rabbits.
- Show students the rabbit vs. deer browse display case. Can anyone tell the difference between the two types of browse and pellets?
- Explain that rabbits snip their food like a pair of scissors, making a clean cut with their top and bottom front teeth. Their pellets look like round M&Ms. Deer don't have any front teeth on the top of their mouth, so their browse looks messy and torn. Deer pellets are more oval-shaped, like a peanut M&M. Explain to students that being able to identify signs of different animals is an important skill to have when studying wildlife.