

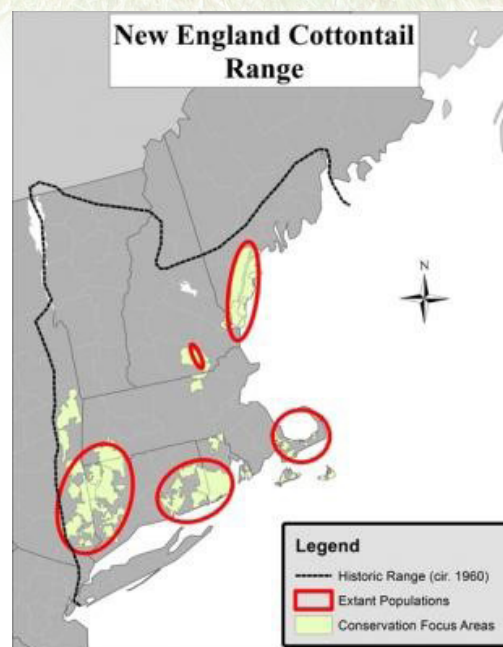
Cottontail Rabbits

There are two species of rabbits that inhabit Rhode Island, the native New England cottontail (*Sylvilagus transitionalis*) and the introduced Eastern cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*). Snow shoe hares (*Lepus americanus*) can also be found but are rare and are distinguished by their very large hind feet and white winter coat. The Eastern cottontail was first introduced into Rhode Island during the early 1900s to supplement the declining New England cottontail populations. Today, Eastern cottontails have become incredibly successful and usurp much of the same resources as New England Cottontails. The young forest resources that New England cottontails need are limited and disjointed, driving our native rabbits to the brink of extinction.

LIFE HISTORY

Range and Habitat: Both species can be found most often in open fields, fencerows, forest edges, barrier beaches, the borders of marshy regions, and areas of thick cover. Rabbits that inhabit backyards are most likely Eastern cottontails because New England cottontails favor young forests with thick brush. Young forests (also called early successional forests) have become less and less common due to humans repressing the natural occurrences, such as fires and flooding from beavers, that forests need to reset. Young forests only last for 10 to 20 years but are crucial to many Rhode Island species such as the woodcock, box turtle and bobcat. Visit youngforest.org to learn more about how RI is part of a regional effort to conserve this critical habitat. The Eastern cottontail can be found throughout the entire United States east of the Rocky Mountains. New England cottontails can be found in eastern New York and parts of all New England states.

Food Habits: Rabbits are herbivores; during the spring and the summer they typically feed on wild grasses, clover, buds, sprouts, and shoots of alfalfa, beans, peas, and dandelions. During the autumn and winter, their diet may consist of buds, stems, and the bark of sumac, red maple, apple, and birch trees. Rabbit fecal pellets are spherical and dark brown when fresh, unlike deer droppings, which are cylindrical and are more oval-shaped.



New England Cottontail Project

WHICH RABBIT IS WHICH?

Eastern vs. New England Cottontail

Both cottontail species measure about the same length (14 - 19 in) and weigh between 1.5 to 4 lbs. The New England cottontail tends to be smaller than the Eastern cottontail. New England cottontails also tend to have smaller ears. Both species have a lifespan of under 2 years. The main physical difference, though tricky to determine, is the color of the rabbits' forehead spots. Eastern cottontails have white spots, while New England cottontails have a black spot. However, this spot could only be a couple of hairs! There are biologists in the region who can identify the difference between the rabbits in the hand, but the most accurate method of identification is through DNA analysis of fecal pellets.

Reproduction: Cottontails are prolific breeders; they usually have 2 –3 litters per year and give birth to their first litter during the early spring. The gestation time for a female rabbit is about 28-30 days and she can breed right after giving birth. The average litter size is five but can range depending on geographical location and food availability. The young are born hairless, blind, and deaf. At the time of birth, the young weigh on average, one ounce and measure four inches in length. They are weaned at about three weeks of age and then leave the nest. Many of the young do not survive due to predators and disease. They are considered fully mature at four months of age.

Female rabbits will dig a 4-inch-deep nest in the ground where they will give birth to and raise their young. The depression is about 5 inches wide and lined with dry grass, foliage and fur from the female's body. Cottontails will use burrows excavated by other animals or other natural cavities during inclement weather or as a means to escape predators. Rabbits are preyed upon by a wide variety of predators such as coyotes, foxes, fishers, mink, and raptors.

I FOUND A BABY BUNNY!

Baby rabbits are often accidentally uncovered in lawns or flowerbeds while gardening. If the babies seem unharmed, simply re-cover the nest. Even if you don't see the mother, she will come back every few hours to feed and check on her babies, even if the nest was disturbed. Babies that were found by pets or are injured can only be cared for by a licensed rehabilitator.

Call the RI Wildlife Clinic: (401) 294-6363



Lou Perotti

Disease: Rabbits are a host to a variety of parasites and diseases. A disease that rabbits occasionally contract is tularemia. This disease is found in both rodents and rabbits. It is caused by a bacterium and transmitted by ticks or fleas and it is always fatal to rabbits. It is a potentially serious illness in humans and can spread from infected animals to humans by handling of infected animal carcasses, being bitten by an infected tick or breathing in the bacteria contained in dried droppings. Though rabies may infect any mammal, it is not commonly found in rabbits. [Rabbit hemorrhagic disease](#) is a fatal disease in rabbits and is considered a foreign animal disease in the United States. This disease is caused by several virus strains. It affects both domestic and wild rabbits, including hares, jackrabbits and cottontails. The New England Cottontail and Eastern Cottontail are susceptible to infection and mortality. RHDV2 does not impact human health.

LIVING WITH RABBITS

Rabbits can cause damage to vegetable gardens, landscape plants, and orchards. The most common complaint against rabbits is that they are garden pests. In the spring and summer, when a garden is flourishing, they will feed upon the growing vegetables and flowers.

State regulations prohibit the translocation (relocation) of captured animals. Captured animals may only be released on the property on which they were captured, or euthanized in a humane manner. The use of foothold traps, snares, and poisons are prohibited in Rhode Island. The DEM does not remove or relocate nuisance wildlife. Property owners, as provided for under *RIGL 20-16-2* may kill, by legal means, any furbearer on their property that is killing livestock, domestic pets, damaging property or crops.

TIPS TO PROTECT YARDS AND GARDENS

- Keep grass short and remove brush piles to eliminate cover.
- Put up 2-3 foot high wire fencing around gardens.
- Treat plants with foul-tasting or smelling repellents, like Capsaicin or blood meal.

Never intentionally feed wildlife.

This causes problems for both humans and wildlife.

Click [here](#) to find a Licensed Nuisance Wildlife Control Specialist near you.

For additional resources visit:
www.wildlifehelp.org