

New England Cottontail

(Sylvilagus transitionalis)

Sometimes called the gray rabbit, brush rabbit, wood hare or cooney, the New England cottontail is the only rabbit native to New England and east of the Hudson River in New York. The other cottontail seen in this region is the eastern cottontail (*S. floridanus*), an abundant but non-native species that looks very similar to the New England cottontail.

Shrinking Range

The New England cottontail was historically found in seven states and ranged from southeastern New York east of the Hudson River, as far as northern Vermont, through New Hampshire and southern Maine, and south throughout Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island. Since 1960, due to maturing forests and development, the range of the New England cottontail shrank by over 80 percent, and the rabbit is no longer found in Vermont.

Competing Cottontails

From the late 1800s through the 1960s, large numbers of eastern cottontail were introduced to areas across New England. Today, with the exception of Maine, the common eastern cottontail occupies most of the New England cottontail's range, and in many areas, has completely replaced the New England cottontail.

External characteristics distinguishing the two species are subtle, making it difficult to tell them apart in the field. Skull shape and genetic samples clearly differentiate the two species.

In Need of Thick Cover

Unlike the eastern cottontail, New England cottontails rely exclusively on young forests and shrublands (early-successional habitats). These habitats are often associated with abandoned agricultural lands, wetlands, clearcuts of woodlands, coastal shrublands, scrub



More than 130 rabbits have been raised in several locations and later released.

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oak barrens, utility rights-of-way, or other areas where disturbance has stimulated the growth of shrubs and other plants.

New England cottontails are reluctant to venture from the cover and food provided by these thick growths. As forests mature, understory plants thin, leading to declining thicket habitats and New England cottontail populations.

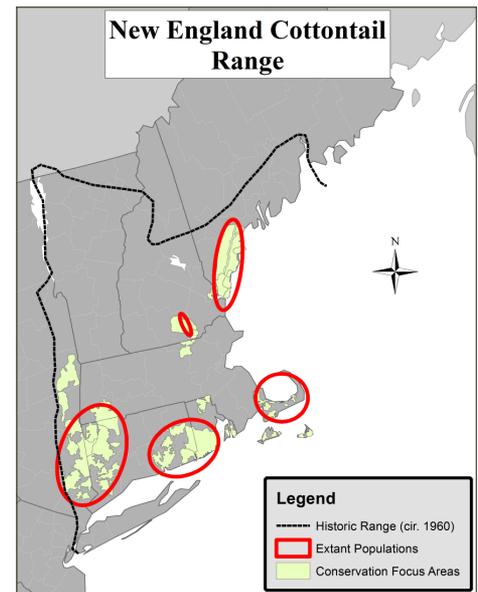
The maturing of forest and corresponding loss of habitat is the greatest threat to the New England cottontail. As forests mature, trees and shrubs die out, and the more open forest understory becomes unsuitable for this rabbit. As this maturation and suburban development happens on a larger scale, the remaining small, isolated patches of suitable habitat will not sustain cottontail populations over time.

The habitat loss is also true for the more than 60 other kinds of wildlife that depend on young forest, including woodcock, a broad range of songbirds, ruffed grouse, bobcats, snowshoe hares, box turtles and frosted elfin butterflies.

Saving a Species and its Habitat

State and federal biologists began a coordinated effort in 2008 to save the New England cottontail. The states of New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Maine, along with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Wildlife Management Institute and the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service have developed and implemented a science-based conservation strategy to bolster the populations of New England cottontails.

The strategy focuses on creating and maintaining the young forest and shrubland that New England cottontails need to survive. The effort has united foresters, farmers, birdwatchers, biologists, hunters, federal and state wildlife professionals



and other conservationists. Private landowners have and will continue to play a crucial role in the recovery of the species, since many of the known populations living on private lands.

Tails of Success

Several efforts have demonstrated that the conservation strategy is having a positive effect for the rabbit. One of the earliest projects in Spignesi Wildlife Management Area

You Can Help Young Forest and New England Cottontails

- Create young forest and shrub thickets on your land.
- Maintain shrub fields or young forests by mowing or cutting back portions of them every five to 15 years.
- Conserve your land.
- Support habitat projects on public and private lands.
- Become a well-informed advocate for New England's native rabbit and other young forest wildlife by regularly visiting www.newenglandcottontail.org, www.youngforest.org, and www.timberdoodle.org.
- Volunteer for your town select board or conservation commission, or join a land trust, and propose habitat projects on municipal or land-trust holdings.



A clear cut may look unsightly to people for a few years, but it's a welcome sight and life-sustaining home for wildlife. This photo shows a farm following the cut and then one year later.



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Experts use heavy machinery to harvest trees and cut back shrubs, and they conduct controlled burns that foster young forest growth. Additionally, partners and volunteers have planted shrubs and created cottontail burrows to speed up the process.

in Scotland, Connecticut, in 2007 led to New England cottontails moving in by 2014. Tree clearing at Stonyfield Yogurt's plant in 2008 in Londonderry, New Hampshire, resulted in a many-fold increase of the site's population. Additionally, for the first time in history, New England cottontails were bred and raised in captivity.

More than 18,000 acres of young forest now exists or will soon be created, and the partners are closing in on a 27,000-acre goal by 2030. Biologists estimate that about 10,500 New England cottontails now live in priority focus areas, bringing the effort three-quarters of the way to a goal of 13,500 rabbits in healthy young forest landscapes by 2030.

Moving Forward

Partners across New England and New York are committed to the path to recovery already underway, and will continue efforts to maintain and develop voluntary conservation agreements with landowners willing to restore habitat in key areas. The captive breeding and release program will provide rabbits to boost remaining populations.

Biologists will monitor the effectiveness of the conservation strategy and make needed adjustments to maximize benefits to the species. Plans and actions are in place to secure the future of the New England cottontail and its young forest habitat for generations to come.

Conservation Actions Keep Cottontail Off Endangered Species List

From 2006 until the early fall of 2015, the Service classified the New England cottontail as a candidate for Endangered Species Act protection. In September 2015, the Service removed the cottontail as a candidate species, determining that, as a result of conservation actions, the species no longer meets the definition of threatened or endangered.

Those conservation actions are described in the "New England Cottontail Conservation Strategy" The partnership has a proven track record for implementing the strategy and its specific actions throughout the species' range, and has clearly demonstrated that those actions will continue. This provides for more management flexibility and fewer conservation action implementation costs.

This decision means that states maintain authority over the New England cottontail. Refer to the state wildlife agencies for information regarding local protections and management.

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