

# Eastern Cottontail Rabbit

*(Silvilagus floridanus)*

---

The Eastern Cottontail rabbit is one of the most popular game animals in the country. It is found in many parts of the United States, and in parts of the Northeast and Midwest, it is the number one game species.

Interest in managing rabbits, which changes with the number of hunters and rabbit-dog trials, has generally been high in the Southeast. Although hunter numbers and rabbit harvests in Mississippi have declined over the last decade, around 60,000 rabbit hunters have harvested about one-half million rabbits annually over the past few years.

## Populations

Late winter populations are mainly rabbits born the previous summer. About 20 percent are 2 years old, and about 8 percent are 3 years and older. The chance that wild rabbits will live to be 4 years old is slight.

Predators such as bobcats, foxes, hawks, and owls are probably the rabbit's worst enemies. Other population controls include bad weather and disease. Hunter harvest removes animals that would normally be taken by predators or some other deadly factor.

Many forces work against the rabbit, but populations are strong. Although rabbit populations are often greatly reduced, rabbits can reproduce prolifically. This lets populations build rapidly when you provide the right food and cover.

## Nesting

During the February-September reproductive season, rabbits produce an average of four young per nest, though the number in a nest may range from one to more than seven. Female rabbits dig cup-shaped holes in which to bear young.

Nests have been found in diverse locations from open ground under tall pines to corners of lawns, with the only hiding thing being soft grass and fur from the mother's breast. Generally, however, rabbits prefer to nest along the edges of fields, ditch banks, and other areas of low cover where the nest is hidden, while the mother feeds and rests nearby. She returns to the nest only to nurse her young, usually in early morning and late afternoon.

Young rabbits begin to make short trips from the nest when they are about 10 days old. When they are about 2 weeks old, they leave the nest for good.

## Range

Cottontails seldom range more than one-half mile and usually spend their lives on 10 acres or less.

## Food Habits

Rabbits eat most plants and eat nearly anything that grows above ground. In the growing season, they eat lots of grasses, sedges, sprouts, and leaves. They also eat fruits, branch tips, buds, and bark, along with waste grain around farmed areas.

## Management

The cottontail rabbit is mainly a farm animal and does best on fairly small cropland areas. Usually, grown-up fence rows, ditch banks, and turnrows on farms provide adequate cover. For the past several decades, farm sizes have increased and "clean farming" has increased, as a result of better equipment. Also, much farmland that was once suitable for cottontails has been changed to improved pasture or loblolly-pine plantations. These enterprises are important, but they do not produce

as many rabbits as when rows were being plowed with mules.

Generally, varying habitats for cottontail rabbits is important, such as mixing cover areas with feeding areas. Good cover is probably the greatest one factor affecting rabbit populations. Cover provides areas for rabbits to escape from predators, nest, feed, and avoid bad weather. You can usually develop and maintain cover, depending on the type of landscape involved. Where natural cover is lacking, such as in large, clean agricultural fields, you can increase cover by letting natural vegetation along fencerows and ditchbanks grow up into thickets. You can also plant 15-foot-wide strips of Kobe or Korean Lespedeza.

Rabbits are helpless at birth, so it is important that you avoid bush-hogging, disking, and burning during the nesting season, particularly in areas of suitable nesting habitat. But strip disking, bush-hogging, and burning fields on a 4- to 5-year rotation can increase food production and woody winter cover. You can break up thick broom sedge fields of several acres by planting evergreens, and around field edges and in the forest, fell trees to the ground carefully, leaving trees attached at the stumps and still alive.

With forestland areas, it is important to keep stands open, so you can keep early successional stages at ground level. Young pine plantations provide excellent cover, and later on, burning these stands can produce excellent quality forage.

Keeping different ages of various timber stands, mixed with open fields, areas of thick cover, and succulent green forage helps produce more woodland rabbits.

In winter, rabbits eat oats, winter wheat, clovers, and other green foods planted next to ground cover. These plantings reduce the distances rabbits have to move to find food and reduce predation.

## General Tips for Improving Rabbit Habitat

- Create small stands (10 to 20 acres) close to fields, swamps, and streams.
- Thin pine stands frequently (3 to 5 years) to stimulate understory growth.
- Use prescribed burning in pine types in winter.
- Control predators where trapping and game laws allow.
- Keep pets (cats and dogs) confined, especially during nesting.