



Eastern Cottontail

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Jodie Owen

Eastern Cottontail

(*Sylvilagus floridanus*)

The eastern cottontail is the most well-known and most widely distributed rabbit in North Carolina. It is well-adapted to live in close proximity to humans, and suburban yards can provide ample habitat, with food and cover to support a family of cottontails.

Description

The eastern cottontail is easily recognized by its brown upper parts and fuzzy white cotton boll-like tail. The more aquatic marsh rabbit (also known as a can-ecutter, or bluetail), though similar in size, can be distinguished from the eastern cottontail by its darker brown upper parts, and the bluish-gray coloration of its tail. The eastern cottontail can only be distinguished from the closely related Appalachian cottontail (which occurs at higher elevations in the mountains) by thorough examination of skull characteristics or genetic analysis.

Males, females, and young all exhibit similar coloration (although younger animals more frequently exhibit a white spot on the forehead which can be absent in older individuals). Sex is difficult to distinguish from external characteristics.

History and Status

Archaeological evidence indicates that large mammals were the predominant food of southeastern Native Americans. However, following European occupation of eastern North America, overhunting, increased agriculture, and expanding rural human populations rapidly depleted large mammal populations. As small farms proliferated during the 1800s and early 1900s, cottontail populations increased significantly and rabbits became a staple in the diet of rural North Carolinians. Additionally, a brisk trade in wild rabbits developed between many rural communities and city markets.

In recent years, the shift away from small farms and the use of “clean farming” techniques have reduced the density of cottontail populations in some areas. Though cottontails remain common across the state, populations will likely be smaller than they were when small farms flourished.

For more information on this species, including status and any applicable regulations, visit www.ncwildlife.org/EasternCottontail.

The eastern cottontail is one of three rabbit species native to North Carolina.

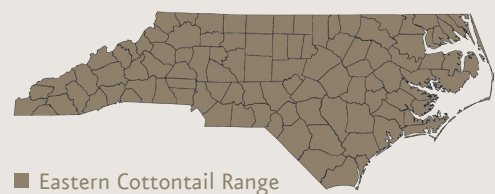


David Lyons

Range and Distribution

The eastern cottontail is the most widely distributed species of North American rabbit. It occurs from southern Canada throughout most of the United States and across much of Mexico. It is by far the best-known and most widely distributed of the three species of rabbits in North Carolina. Population densities are highest when there is suitable habitat at a sufficient scale, typically consisting of a patchwork of farmland and early successional habitat. However, rabbits also do well in habitats ranging from vacant lots in urban areas to extensive mature woodlands.

Range Map



Eastern Cottontail

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Habitats & Habits

Rabbits occur statewide wherever there is adequate browse and cover. They eat a wide variety of plants, although most come from three plant families—the grasses, legumes (bean family) and composites (aster or sunflower family). Herbaceous plant foods are preferred when available.

A cottontail's food resources can become scarce at times. In winter, many species of plants are dormant or not available, and rabbits often resort to stripping bark on shrubs and saplings to eat the soft cambium, or tissue, layer underneath. Population levels in the fall are influenced by summer rainfall. High-protein foods are required for reproduction, and researchers have documented that females do not produce young during extended summer droughts. The highest fall populations follow summers with adequate rainfall that keeps vegetation actively growing and allows rabbits to feed on the more nutritious new growth.

Rabbits are most active in early morning, late afternoon or at night. Vulnerable to many predators, the rabbit uses its camouflaged coloration as its first line of defense. It's also protected by its use of dense cover for a daytime resting place and its nocturnal habits. A quick, short burst of speed toward cover provides the second line of defense, while the way the rabbit slips in and out of dense cover often confuses the pursuer that continues the chase.

Human Interactions

Rabbits are still a valued game species in the state even though they aren't a staple food source like they once were to early settlers and rural citizens. Rabbits can also be considered potential competitors for farm or garden crops. Many North Carolina residents today appreciate the opportunity just to view cottontails.

Though not as numerous as in the past, rabbit hunters and beaglers are still an enthusiastic and dedicated lot. Once surpassed in numbers only by squirrel hunters, rabbit hunters now represent a smaller constituency of North Carolina's overall hunting population.

For More Information

Webster, W. D., J. F. Parnell, and W. C. Biggs, Jr. 2004. *Mammals of the Carolinas, Virginia, and Maryland*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA.

Whitaker, J. O., and W. J. Hamilton, Jr. 1998. *Mammals of the Eastern United States*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, USA.

Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Mammalia

Order: Lagomorpha

Average Size

Length: ~12.5 – 19.6 in. (32.0 – 49.8 cm)

Weight: ~2.0 – 4.0 lbs (0.9-1.8 kg)

Food

Herbaceous plants, often in the grass, bean or aster family. Will also feed on grains and the inner bark of shrubs and saplings.

Breeding/Young

Males are called bucks and females are called does. Breeding occurs in January or February and continues through September. North Carolina cottontails average three to five young per litter, and they are biologically capable of producing up to seven litters during the reproductive season. Females are receptive to breeding immediately upon giving birth.

The gestation period is 28 days. Young are born in a fur-lined nest and remain there for the first two weeks of their life. Some young females born in early spring can become reproductively active during their first summer and produce litters by late summer in areas of fertile soils and regular rainfall.

Life Expectancy

As is characteristic of species with a high reproductive potential, rabbits have a high mortality rate. Annual mortality is often as high as 80-90%.



Juvenile eastern cottontail

Jodie Owen

Credits

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