

New England Cottontail

Rabbit at risk

Frequently asked questions

1. I often see rabbits in my neighborhood. Are they New England cottontails?

Probably not. The New England cottontail was the only rabbit east of the Hudson River until the eastern cottontail was introduced in the late 1800s and early 1900s, first to Nantucket Island, Massachusetts. This was followed by introductions on nearby Martha's Vineyard, ostensibly as a raptor prey alternative to the dwindling (now extinct) heath hen population. Subsequently, they were introduced in Connecticut east of the Hudson River.

Until the 1950s, the New England cottontail was considered the more abundant species in New England. By the 1960s, biologists noticed that the eastern cottontail was replacing the New England cottontail throughout New England.

Today, the eastern cottontail is far more abundant, except in Maine where the New England cottontail remains the only rabbit. The New England cottontail is also found in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and New York east of the Hudson River. However, the species range has contracted by more than 80 percent since 1960.

2. How can you tell the difference between a New England cottontail and an eastern cottontail?

New England and eastern cottontails can be difficult to distinguish in the field by external characteristics. The New England cottontail has shorter ears, slightly smaller body size, a black line on the anterior edge of the ears, a black spot between the ears and no white spot on the forehead. The skulls of the two species are quite different and are a reliable means of distinguishing the two cottontail species. Both the eastern cottontail and the New England



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cottontail can be distinguished from the snowshoe hare by a lack of seasonal variation in fur coloration.

3. Does the New England cottontail breed with the eastern cottontail?

One researcher reported that the two species produced young in captivity. However, several genetic investigations indicate that the two species do not hybridize in the wild.

4. How do scientists determine what species is living in a patch of habitat?

Scientists conduct annual surveys throughout the New England cottontail's range. While some trapping is conducted to identify the resident rabbit, most surveys analyze bunny droppings. These pellets are collected and sent to a specialized genetics lab. Genetic analysis determines if the pellets were deposited by a New England cottontail, an eastern cottontail or a snowshoe hare.

5. What environmental factors led to the New England cottontail's decline?

Unlike the eastern cottontail, the New England cottontail requires thickets (patches of thick, low-growing shrubs and briars) as habitat. Eastern cottontails are frequently found in yards grazing on clover, while New England cottontails are reluctant to venture away from thick cover.

In order merely to survive, a single New England cottontail requires at least 2½ acres of suitable habitat. For long-term security and persistence, 10 rabbits need at least 25 acres. Over the last century, forests throughout New England have aged. As shade from the canopy of mature trees increases, understory vegetation thins and no longer provides sufficient New England cottontail habitat.

6. How are other species that live in thickets doing?

Numerous species that depend upon thickets for survival are declining throughout New England. They include birds, such as the American woodcock, eastern towhee, golden-winged warbler, blue-winged warbler, yellow breasted chat, brown thrasher, prairie warbler and indigo bunting. Some reptiles also depend upon these habitats, including the black racer (a snake), smooth green snake and wood turtle. Insects live in these habitats, and many of their populations are declining, probably due to decreased habitat.

7. What is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service doing to help the New England cottontail?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service works with partners to restore habitat for the New England cottontail. If you would like to learn more about what you can do to help, read or download the Landowner's Guide to New England Cottontail Habitat Management at <http://www.edf.org/article.cfm?contentID=8829>. You can also request a hard copy from Anthony Tur, New England Field Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 70 Commercial Street, Suite 300, Concord, NH 03301.

Learn more about the New England cottontail at <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/indepth/rabbit/index.html>

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