

Maine New England Cottontail Working Group

Tracking and Pellet Surveys

Frequently Asked Questions

Why are we looking for the New England cottontail (NEC)?

The New England cottontail (*Sylvilagus transitionalis*) is Maine's only native rabbit. It was once common, but over the last decade it has disappeared from our landscape so quickly that the state listed it as an endangered species, and it is a candidate for listing under the federal Endangered Species Act. We think the cottontail might still be found in its historic range in communities north and west of Portland, however we don't have the resources to survey such a large area. Confirming the presence of the cottontail in these communities would be a game changer for conserving this species in Maine, and across its range.

What other similar animals might I encounter while I'm surveying?

You will probably find tracks, pellets, and browse from snowshoe hare (*Lepus americanus*). Use the laminated [tracking cards](#) that we provided at the training to help you distinguish the differences between the two animals. The [Landowner's Guide](#) also provides more information about snowshoe hare.

Where are eastern cottontails found?

Eastern cottontails (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) are found throughout the eastern United States, including all of the New England cottontail's range, except for Maine. It is likely that the Piscataqua River has thus far prevented their spread into Maine. The closest population of eastern cottontails to the Maine population is primarily in the Portsmouth/Newington, NH area, although an eastern cottontail was also recently detected in Durham, NH.

Will I disturb New England cottontails by...

Surveying?

If there are cottontails in the patch that you are surveying, you might get lucky and see one if you get too close and it "flushes." However a cottontail's main defense strategy is to remain motionless. You are much more likely to see sign of cottontails (pellets, tracks, browse) than an actual rabbit. Although cottontails need to browse a lot during the winter and may need to remain motionless while you are nearby, the small amount of time it takes to conduct a survey will not be overly detrimental.

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Snowmobiling?

Cottontails stick close to cover most of the time. Thus, they will likely not be out in the open where a snowmobiler would encounter one. If by chance they are, the noise of the snowmobile will most likely scare them back into cover.

Cross-country skiing or snowshoeing?

In general, these activities should have very little impact on cottontails. Cottontails may exhibit subnivean (activity beneath the snow) behavior on occasion, so it is possible that snowshoeing in some areas could collapse ‘tunnels,’ but it is unlikely.

Where can I get some good maps of my site(s)?

If you signed up for a site at the training you will receive an email containing detailed site maps. If you don’t have access to a printer, we can send you a hard copy, or you can pick one up at the Gulf of Maine Coastal Program office in Falmouth. If there’s a site you want to survey that was not included in our list of potential sites, then you can create your own maps using Google Earth or similar programs, or send an email to mao_lin@fws.gov and we will make one for you.

Where do I find information about the landowner?

Each site map that you will receive has a map lot number on it. This information can be used to find the landowner. All necessary landowner contact information should be available at the town hall. Your local land trust may also be able to help you find landowner information.

Do I need to get permission from Central Maine Power (CMP) to survey on the powerlines?

Yes. CMP requires advance notice of anyone surveying for New England cottontail. If you signed up for a site on CMP property please do not survey at this time. We will provide further instructions in the near future.

I didn’t sign up for any sites at the training, but I would like to now.

If you are interested in signing up for a survey site send an email to mao_lin@fws.gov.

I know somebody who wants to do this, but did not attend the training. Can this person also participate?

Yes, this person can also participate in the survey effort. Have them contact us for training materials, maps, overview, etc.

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Can we work in teams?

Yes, in fact we encourage you to work in teams since more pairs of eyes means you will be more likely to spot tracks, pellets, and other cottontail sign. Plus working in teams is safer. If you work in teams, please indicate all of your team members' names on your survey form (use the "Other comments" field, if necessary), and account for your combined hours spent on the survey in the "Total volunteer survey time (minutes)" field.

Why do we need to keep track of our time and travel?

Keeping track of your time and travel is very important. We will use this information to apply for grant funding for future NEC conservation efforts. Time and travel is recorded on a per person basis, so if you go out with somebody keep track of everybody's time.

Should we fill out a data sheet even if we didn't find anything?

Yes! Please fill out a data sheet even if you did not find anything. All data, including information about snowshoe hare or lack of rabbits, helps us determine where the current populations of NEC are or are not located.

Where can I get additional supplies?

Additional supplies can be picked up from any of the agency contacts listed below:

Cory Stearns
Maine Dept of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife
358 Shaker Rd
Gray, ME 04039
207-657-2345
cory.r.stearns@maine.gov

Mao Lin
USFWS Gulf of Maine Coastal Program
4R Fundy Road
Falmouth, ME 04105
207-781-8364
mao_lin@fws.gov

Lindsey Fenderson or Lynn Wolfe
USFWS Rachel Carson NWR
321 Port Road
Wells, ME 04090
lindsey_fenderson@fws.gov or lynn_wolfe@fws.gov

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Is there any equipment that I can borrow?

A limited number of GPS units and cameras are available for you to borrow from the Gulf of Maine Coastal Program in Falmouth. Check with your local land trust, they *may* have equipment available. Also, most smart phones come equipped with both camera and GPS capabilities which are suitable for the NEC survey project.

I've never used a GPS unit before...

Don't worry, we can help! The Maine Forest Service has offered to hold a 4 hour GPS workshop. The workshop is not scheduled at this time, but if we have enough interest from community members then we can easily hold a training session. This workshop would cover basic GPS concepts, how to collect waypoints and tracks, and how to save and transfer data. If you are interested in this opportunity please contact Lynn Wolfe via email lynn_wolfe@fws.gov.

How does the spread of glossy buckthorn affect New England cottontails?

To date, we have not studied differences in winter nutritional value among invasive species and native shrubs. Some invasive species do provide winter browse for cottontails and most provide winter cover. Actually, in many areas, the only shrub cover is from invasive species, thus in many of our management areas with cottontails, we are compromising by not obliterating the invasives until there is quality native shrub cover for cottontails to use. However, we have not observed cottontails browsing on glossy buckthorn, and its habit (i.e. the overall shape and growth form) of the species does not provide suitable thermal or escape cover. Thus this species is one of the least suitable for New England cottontails.

We received a lot of materials and supplies at the training, do we need to return any of those things?

If possible, please return any unused vials to one of the agencies so we can use them for future surveys. You do not need to return any other training materials, unless you borrowed a camera or GPS unit.

Why are the vials in my kits numbered?

Each vial was given a unique identification number before the training so we can match the vial to a datasheet and location. If you collect pellets, the number on the vial should be recorded on your data sheet under the "Vial Number" cell.

When will I get the DNA results from my pellets?

At the end of the tracking season we will release the results of the DNA analysis to all NEC survey volunteers. Please note that not every pellet will be analyzed. USFWS and MDIFW staff will determine if the pellets should be analyzed based on supporting evidence (or lack of evidence) such as track and habitat photographs.

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Can I still survey if there is no snow on the ground?

Please wait until there is snow on the ground to survey. The presence of snow makes it much easier to find tracks and pellets. It also allows you to distinguish NEC tracks from snowshoe hare and preserves the pellet DNA. We recommend that you restrict searches to at least 36 hours, but preferably no more than 4 days, after the most recent snowfall to maximize accumulation of fresh tracks and pellets. You can find detailed guidelines in your [protocol](#). If there's no snow but you're still eager to do something for cottontails, you can track down the landowner(s) of your site, and obtain permission for when there is adequate snow cover.

Where can I go to see cottontail tracks?

A great place to view NEC tracks and pellets is along the shrubby trails at Crescent Beach State Park located in Cape Elizabeth, ME. Crescent Beach has a known population of NEC, as well as snowshoe hare. This is a wonderful place to work on your tracking skills and learn how to distinguish between the two species. Please be mindful of all the park's rules and regulations during your visit.

Where can I find more resources or information about New England cottontail?

More information about the NEC can be found at:

<http://newenglandcottontail.org/>

You can find a copy of [A Landowner's Guide to New England Cottontail Habitat Management](#) at the site above.

You can also find us on Facebook!

<http://www.facebook.com/RachelCarsonNWR>

We want you to stay in touch with our community of NEC survey volunteers! The best way to do this is through the Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge Facebook page. It's simple, all you have to do is "like" our page and then share your rabbit tracking stories, questions and insights. Post your own tracking tips, comments about your experiences with the surveys, and photographs of tracks, habitat, wildlife sightings, people tracking, etc. Please **do not** include landowner information in your posts.

By "liking" our page you will not only learn about New England cottontail, you will also be kept up to date on the latest refuge activities and wildlife sightings!