



05/13/12 - Conserving Rare Cottontails



For the New England cottontail, mild winter conditions were a stroke of luck ? a lack of snow made it easier for them to hide and find food. For the biologists who are surveying cottontails, the same conditions made it maddeningly difficult to find evidence of their presence. The challenges have not slowed the efforts of biologists from New Hampshire Fish and Game's Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Program, along with partners across the Northeast, to ensure the survival of this state-endangered native rabbit.



Over the past few years, Fish and Game has worked with University of New Hampshire researchers, who developed protocols for detecting New England cottontails and creating population estimates from survey results. Fish and Game staff helped collect data and are continuing to look for any rabbits that may not have been identified during the previous years' work and to confirm the persistence of individual rabbits at the occupied patches. To find out how many New England cottontails are left and just where they are found, biologists usually look for evidence of the rabbits' presence in the snow. Needless to say, last winter there wasn't much snow in which to track rabbits in New Hampshire!

Monitoring for New England cottontails provides information about the location of remaining individuals, but the road to recovery for the species lies in the management efforts that are being done to increase the amount of available habitat on the landscape and number of rabbits that occupy these patches.

Many habitat management tools are used to create the "thickets" that New England cottontails need for survival ? the same type of brambly patch that saved Br'er Rabbit many a time. Timber harvesting, invasive species removal, and planting of native shrubs and forbs for cover and food are three techniques that Fish and Game has been using to turn historic cottontail habitat to its shrubby, scrubby ideal. These management actions are based on a scientific species recovery plan that will benefit New England cottontails as well as dozens of other species, such as chestnut-sided warbler, smooth green snake and American woodcock, which require healthy young forests and shrublands. To date, more than 300 acres of new habitat have been created on both public and private lands since 2009. An additional 1,700 acres is needed to meet the goal for available habitat in New Hampshire by 2030.



After we build it, New England cottontails will come; we need to be patient, however, because

it may take up to 5 years of growth for the new thicket to be suitable for rabbits to live in. In the meantime, working with partners at the Roger Williams Park Zoo in Providence, Rhode Island, biologists have established a pilot program for captive-breeding the cottontails. The goal is to breed New England cottontails in a controlled setting, using best practices to ensure genetic diversity and health in the animals, and then release the rabbits into the wild. This pilot program may be expanded to include other facilities across the Northeast ? to augment declining populations across the region and reintroduce rabbits to their historic range. While the warm, dry winter made things difficult for biologists, the weather was quite advantageous for the cottontails. The lack of snow provided better concealment for the rabbits, whose fur remains brown in the winter. It also improved conditions for the rabbits to forage on twigs, bark and buds of woody shrubs that can be difficult to access in soft, deep snow. In addition, the early spring brought green-up during the first part of the breeding season, providing high-quality nutrition for new litters of the year.

New Hampshire Fish and Game is working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Natural Resource Conservation Service and other conservation partners across six states in the Northeast to recover the New England cottontail. Once common in our state, the population of this rabbit has dwindled over the last 50 years, so that today this unique native mammal faces possible extinction. [Learn more here.](#)