



Marsh Rabbit

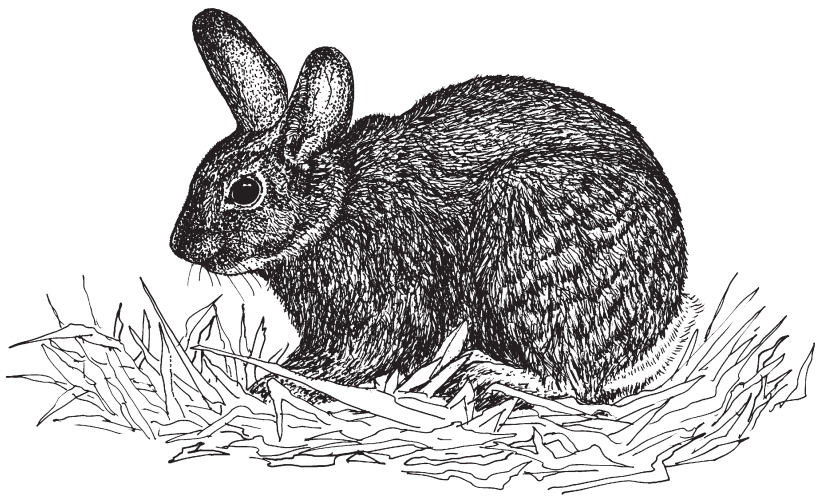
Sylvilagus palustris

There are 49 species of rabbits located worldwide, and three of them are native to North Carolina. While the eastern cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) is found throughout the state and the Appalachian cottontail (*Sylvilagus obscurus*) is restricted to the mountains of western North Carolina, the marsh rabbit (*Sylvilagus palustris*) is found only in wet habitats in the eastern half of the state. The marsh rabbit and its relative, the swamp rabbit (*Sylvilagus aquaticus*), differ from many other rabbit species in that they lead semi-aquatic lives. They are excellent swimmers.

Marsh rabbits are quite secretive. They live in thick, relatively inaccessible bottomlands and swamps and prefer to feed and move at night. However, the animals can be observed by anyone willing to venture into their natural habitat and flush them from the thick, brushy areas of cover that they prefer.

History and Status

Marsh rabbit distribution has changed little from historic times and is probably limited by the availability of wet lowland habitat in the Coastal Plain of the southeastern United States. It is difficult to estimate marsh rabbit population sizes because of the rabbit's small body size, secretive nature and preference for dense habitat. Furthermore, like most rabbit species, marsh rabbit populations undergo periods of dramatic highs and lows. Marsh rabbits can be



abundant when adequate areas of wet habitat are available and populations of predators are relatively low.

During settlement of the state, many citizens used all rabbit species, including the marsh rabbit, as sources of meat for food and fur for clothing. Marsh rabbits reproduce rapidly and are currently classified as a game animal in North Carolina; they can be legally hunted within set seasons. Today, all rabbit species are popular among North Carolinians for both sport and food hunting. Marsh rabbits are pursued with dogs such as the beagle and by hunters simply beating the brush in hopes of flushing one from its hiding area.

Description

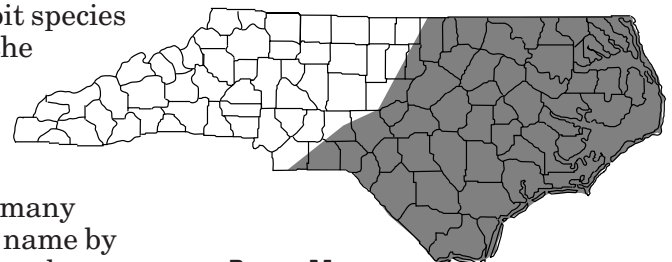
Adult marsh rabbits are medium-sized, dark brown and coarse-haired, and they have smaller feet than many other species of rabbits. The dark color of the underside of the tail distinguishes the marsh rabbit from all other rabbit species that occur within the same range and has led to the nickname "bluetail" that is commonly used in many localities. Another name by which the species has been known is "swamp rabbit," which

can be misleading, since the real swamp rabbit is a distinct species and is different from the marsh rabbit.

Habitat and Habits

Marsh rabbits, being semi-aquatic animals, require dense habitat adjacent to a permanent supply of water, such as the borders of lakes, streams, canals, ditches and marshes. Like all rabbit species, marsh rabbits are completely herbivorous and have a diet consisting entirely of vegetative matter. Marsh rabbits prefer succulent roots, rhizomes, stems and bulbs of a variety of plants, but they will eat bark and twigs during winter food shortages. One common name for the marsh rabbit is "cane cutter," which refers to the animal's habit of eating switch cane, a tough, woody-stemmed grass.

Marsh rabbits are nocturnal, meaning that they are chiefly



Range Map:
Occupied range 

active at night, yet they may be observed during the day if humans or animals disturb them from their thick daytime hiding places. During the day they hide and rest in thick clumps of grasses and brush. Several marsh rabbits may be found together in areas of abundant food and cover, but females are sometimes territorial during the breeding season.

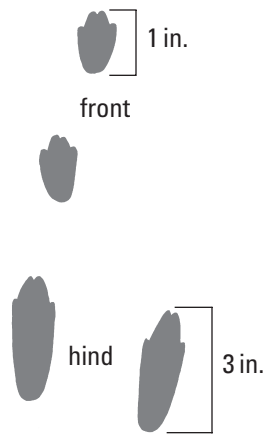
A doe (female rabbit) probably breeds from February through September, though marsh rabbits in the Deep South may breed year-round, like the closely related swamp rabbits. Does may give birth as many as three or four times a year in good habitat. Between two and five young marsh rabbits are born in each litter. Blind, almost hairless and weighing just a few ounces at birth, marsh rabbit young are helpless and require a large amount of parental care. The young rabbits' eyes open on the fourth or fifth day after birth, and they are dependent on their mother for milk until they leave the nest in 12 to 15 days.

Range and Distribution

Marsh rabbits are native to the southeastern United States and are distributed throughout the Coastal Plain area from southeastern Virginia to southeastern Alabama and all of the Florida panhandle. In North Carolina, marsh rabbits are found throughout the Coastal Plain and eastern Piedmont regions, encompassing the eastern one-half of the state. While they may be found in the upper Coastal Plain and along river courses in the lower Piedmont, marsh rabbits are most abundant near the coast in large bottomland swamps, marshy areas and coastal islands.

People Interactions

Many North Carolinians commonly see rabbits along roadsides or in yards, gardens and vegetable patches. However, most of these



rabbits are the more prevalent and widespread eastern cottontails. Marsh rabbits are much less visible and noticeable due to their secretive nature and preference for swampy, remote areas. All rabbit species are hunted in North Carolina, but the marsh rabbit's preference for more inaccessible, wet areas and the habit of sticking to dense cover when pursued by dogs probably mean that they receive lighter hunting pressure than eastern cottontails. Marsh rabbits rarely cause damage to crops or human-cultivated plants.

References

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- Vaughan, T.A. *Mammalogy* (Philadelphia: Saunders College Publications, 1986).

Credits

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MARSH RABBIT

Classification

Class: Mammalia
Order: Lagomorpha

Average Size

Length: 14 to 16 in.
Weight: 2½ to 3½ lbs.

Food

Rhizomes, bulbs, and other tender and succulent vegetation when available. Bark and twigs in winter.

Breeding

Rabbits are promiscuous animals, meaning they take multiple mates. Breeding season is from February to September in most areas, and does may give birth three to four times per season.

Young

Gestation period is approximately 28 days. Usually 2 to 4 blind, nearly hairless young are placed in a depression in the ground.

Life Expectancy

Capable of living up to 4 years in the wild, but most marsh rabbits die before they reach their first birthday.