



Cottontail Rabbit

Sylvilagus floridanus

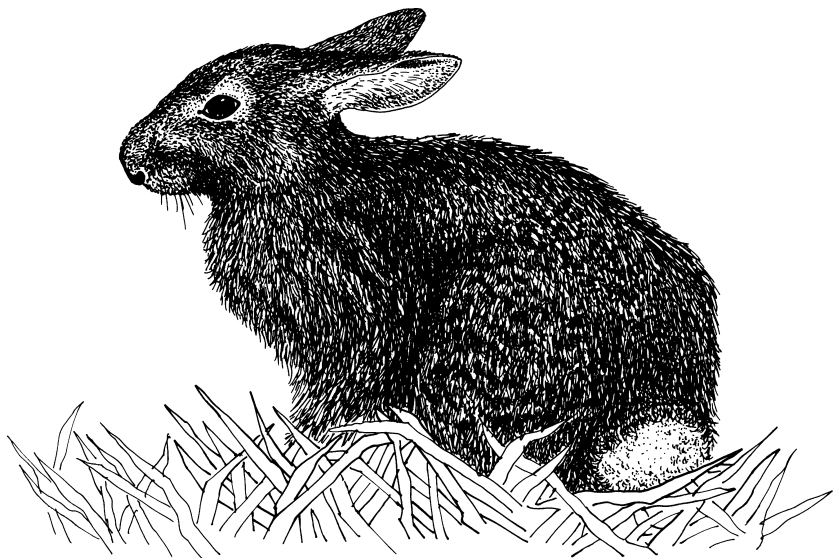
Nursery rhymes and folk tales are often children's first introduction to animals and these stories shape their views about wildlife at an early age. In Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus stories, for example, we learn about Brer Rabbit's close association with the brier patch and about its arch enemy, Brer Fox. Indeed, for many youngsters, rabbits provide the initial contact with wild mammals.

The cottontail often prospers in close proximity to humans, and even suburban homes with succulent lawns for grazing and shrubbery for hiding places frequently support a resident family of cottontails.

History and Status

Archaeological evidence indicates that large mammals were the predominant food of southeastern Indians. Following European occupation of eastern North America, however, overhunting, increased agricultural clearing and an expanding rural human population rapidly depleted large mammal populations. As small farms proliferated during the 1800s and early 1900s, cottontail populations exploded 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 a landscape dominated by small farms and a more tolerant attitude toward predators have combined to reduce the density of cottontail populations. Though cottontails remain common across



the state, populations will likely be smaller than they were when small farms flourished and predators were controlled.

Description

The eastern cottontail is easily recognized, even on the run, by its brown upper parts and fuzzy white "cotton-boll" sized tail. The more aquatic marsh rabbit (commonly called "swamp rabbits", "canecutters", or "blue tails"), 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 be distinguished from the closely related Appalachian cottontail, the rabbit of the high mountain regions of the state, only by thorough examination of skull characteristics.

Males, females and young all exhibit similar coloration. Sex is difficult to distinguish externally.

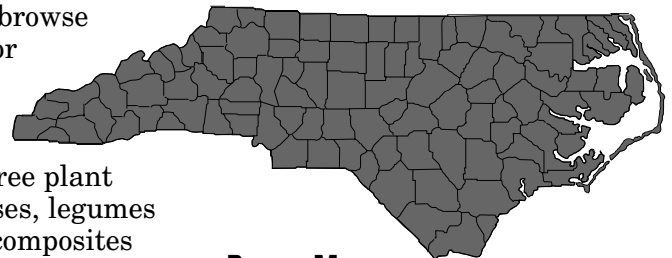
Habitat and Habits

Rabbits occur statewide wherever adequate low browse grows near cover for concealment. 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). Succulent 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. But 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.

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 movements. A quick, short burst of speed toward cover provides



Range Map:
Found statewide ■

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.

Rabbits' survival strategy consists of out-reproducing their long list of enemies. The gestation period is a short 28 days, and females are receptive to breeding immediately after giving birth. Cottontails average 4.5 young per litter in North Carolina and are biologically capable of producing up to 7 litters during the February to September reproductive season. Additionally, young females born in early spring become reproductively active during their first summer and can produce litters by late summer in areas of fertile soils and regular rainfall.

It is doubtful that wild rabbit populations will ever attain their full reproductive capacity, and it is a good thing. Under ideal breeding conditions, a pair of rabbits can produce 40 rabbits in average-sized litters during a single breeding season.

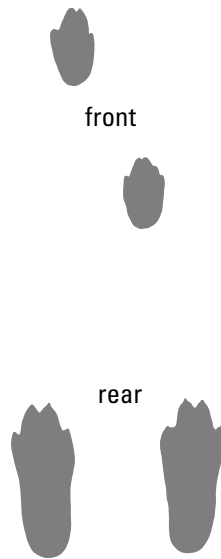
Range and Distribution

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.

The cottontail reaches highest densities in a patchwork of farmland and brushland, but don't be surprised to see rabbits in habitats ranging from vacant lots in urban areas to extensive mature woodlands.

People Interactions

People once valued rabbits primarily as a food item, or they looked on them as potential competitors for farm or garden crops. But many North Carolina residents today appreciate the opportunity just to view cottontails. Rabbits are most active in early



morning, late afternoon or at night.

Though not as numerous as in the past, our rabbit hunters and beaglers are an enthusiastic and dedicated lot. Once surpassed in numbers only by squirrel hunters, currently the population of rabbit hunters ranks fourth among all hunters. In recent years, the popularity of beagle field trials has increased. A growing number of field trial clubs and dog trainers manage fenced enclosures to maintain high rabbit populations and prevent dogs from becoming lost.

References

Terres, John. *From Laurel Hill to Siler's Bog: The Walking Adventures of a Naturalist* (Alfred Knopf, 1969; reprinted University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

Webster, William et al. *Mammals of the Carolinas, Virginia, and Maryland* (University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

Credits

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COTTONTAIL RABBIT

Classification

Class: Mammal

Order: Lagomorpha

Average Size

Weight: The fall and winter weights of adult cottontails live-trapped in Piedmont North Carolina average 2 ½ lbs.

Food

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

Breeding

Males are called bucks and females are called does. Breeding is initiated with the first warming trends in January or February and continues through September. Females are receptive to breeding immediately upon giving birth.

Young

The gestation period is a short 28 days. North Carolina cottontails average 4.5 young per litter. Young are born in a fur-lined nest and remain there for the first two weeks of their life.

Life Expectancy

As is characteristic of species with a high reproductive potential, rabbits have a high mortality rate. Fewer than 20 of every 100 young rabbits live to celebrate their first birthday.