



# Eastern Cottontail Rabbit

## *Sylvilagus floridanus*

The Eastern Cottontail is one of the most common mammals in New York State. Among the Cottontail's many adaptations for survival are sharp senses of hearing and smell. Each spring and fall, many young rabbits are found and brought to rehabilitators. Some are in need of help; others are mistaken for orphans though their parents are nearby.

### VOLUNTEERS FOR WILDLIFE

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### Natural History

A small to medium-sized animal, the Eastern Cottontail is usually brown with faintly speckled black and tan markings. The underside of the animal is white, and the tail is brown



above and white beneath. Since the tail of the rabbit is usually turned up, the white "cottontail" is usually visible, hence their name.

Cottontails (as well as all rabbits and hares) are not rodents; they are *lagomorphs*, which have an extra pair of incisors. A cottontail's sharp senses of hearing and smell are among its adaptations for survival. The eyes are located on the sides of the head for wide peripheral vision. The ears are large and pivotal and are cupped to detect faint sounds.

When danger is sensed, the cottontail "freezes" and relies on camouflaged coloration to avoid detection. If necessary, cottontails can move quickly (18-20 mph) for short distances. Their zig-zag running pattern is meant to confuse predators.

## *Natural History, Continued...*

Cottontails have an extremely high reproductive capacity. Mating occurs from late February through September. The young are born 28 days after mating, and the female may mate again the day after she gives birth. Litters consist of three to seven young with an average of five. A healthy adult female cottontail can have up to five litters per breeding season.

A typical nest may be found in an open field or thick brush. The shallow depression in the ground is lined with dead grasses and fur plucked from the female's underside. A cover of stems and grasses provides protection from weather and concealment from predators. During the winter months, rabbits will use "forms" or hollows in thickets or snow that provide protection from the wind as well as overhead cover. Woodchuck burrows are also used as shelter from predators and cold weather.

Infant cottontails are born hairless with their eyes closed. They grow quickly and leave the nest in three to five weeks. Young females can begin reproducing at three months of age and can have a litter or two before their first winter. Most rabbits do not live for more than a year, but their potential life span is three to four years. Cottontails are solitary by nature and do not remain in a family group after leaving the nest, although they may stay in the same vicinity and use the same "rabbit runs". Including adult mortality, 85% of the rabbit population dies each year. This includes at least one out of every three babies that are born per year. This high mortality rate is a result of nature's checks and balances as one pair of rabbits and their offspring could potentially produce five million young over a five year period. Many mortality factors affect rabbit populations. Weather is a major factor in nest mortality as ground nests are susceptible to flooding in heavy rains.

Internal parasites that affect rabbits include tapeworms, roundworms, and flukes. External parasites include fleas, ticks, lice and fly bots. The most common serious disease that affects rabbits is Tularemia or "rabbit fever". Spread by contaminated drinking water and external parasites, rabbit fever affects the liver and spleen and is almost always fatal. Rabbits do not carry rabies. Predators such as foxes, skunks, opossums, raccoons, snakes, crows, domestic cats, dogs, and even shrews raid rabbit nests and prey on adult rabbits.

The cottontail diet consists entirely of vegetation. Cottontails prefer the succulent growth of green plants, adding bark and twigs during the lean winter months. Rabbits frequently ingest their own feces (coprophagy). This activity recycles previously unabsorbed nutrients vital to the health of the rabbit. As herbivores, rabbits perform a vitally important ecological role of converting plants into animal flesh. As an abundant prey species, they serve as energy sources for many kinds of predators.

## **Legalities**

In New York State, wild mammals are protected by Environmental Conservation law (article 11, title 5, section 11-0511). It is illegal to keep a



wild rabbit in captivity as a pet without the proper state and/or federal permitting. If you have been caring for an orphaned rabbit and need to return it to the wild, please contact a wildlife rehabilitator for assistance. In the event a rabbit must be trapped and removed from a homeowner's property, we recommended hiring a licensed, insured, and humane wildlife control professional to remove the animals and prevent future problems.

## Assisting Young Cottontails

Cottontails are a good example of the amazing amount of time that some wild animal parents spend away from their young. Infant rabbits are left alone for most of the day while the mother goes off in search of food. Nests are often found at the edges of suburban lawns. Young cottontails huddle together in the nest under a blanket of grass. The babies are nursed by the mother and remain in the nest for the course of about two weeks. Each morning, the mother leaves her babies covered with grass to hide them. In the evening, the mother returns to the nest to feed her young and stay with them for the night. During the day, she deliberately stays away from the nest to avoid drawing attention to it.

If you find a cottontail nest, the best thing to do is leave it alone! **DO NOT TOUCH THE BABY RABBITS!** It is highly unlikely that babies found alone are abandoned. However, adult rabbits will occasionally abandon their young if the nest has been seriously disturbed. Young cottontails are very nervous and may even die of fright if they are handled by a human or caught by a cat or dog. Their stillness may be mistaken for relaxation but in fact they are frozen in fear.

If you have found a nest of young cottontails and are certain that the mother is not going to return and that the babies are not old enough to survive on their own, it is appropriate to contact a licensed wildlife rehabilitator for assistance. Rehabilitators are trained to care for young wildlife in a manner that is best for the animal's future survival in the wild. To insure fear of people, cats and dogs, young cottontails should be placed in companionship with other young developing wild rabbits. But, of course, the best possible care of young rabbits can only be provided by their own parents. Don't be a kidnapper!

If you have found a young cottontail that you suspect is truly orphaned, contact our wildlife advisory hotline at (631) 423-0982, or email us at [wildlifeadvisory@gmail.com](mailto:wildlifeadvisory@gmail.com).

Orphaned rabbits may be kept warm in a small cardboard box lined with newspaper and soft ravel-free cloth. The box should be placed in a quiet, draft-free area away from children, pets, and household noises. A heating pad on a low setting placed underneath half of the box will keep the young animal warm.

Please do not attempt to offer food or drink to an orphaned rabbit before seeking help from a rehabilitator. Cow's milk is not an appropriate source of nutrition, and there is a significant risk of a young rabbit aspirating (inhaling) liquid, potentially leading to a respiratory infection or death.

Cottontails are born with little fur, and their eyes sealed shut. As they grow, their eyes open and their ears will perk up. Once their eyes open, a young cottontail is capable of eating solid foods on its own, but will ordinarily remain with its mother and siblings for a short time. The photo below illustrates a group of rabbits that are still in need of care, as their eyes are still closed and their ears are not yet perked up.



## Quick Facts

Cottontail rabbits are poorly equipped to fight a predator, but they can run as fast as 20 mph for a short distance to escape from a threat.

Prey animals like rabbits have their eyes on the sides of their head, rather than facing forward like humans. This allows them to see a predator approaching from almost any direction.

A female rabbit can have as many as 35 babies in one breeding season!

Baby rabbits are old enough to eat solid food just two weeks after they are born.

Rabbit nests are often found at the edges of suburban lawns, and the babies are thought to be orphaned when no parent is seen. In fact, infant rabbits are left alone for most of the day while the mother goes off in search of food. The mother typically returns only at dawn and dusk to feed the babies.

Young cottontails are very nervous and may even die of fright if they are handled by a human or caught by a cat or dog.



## About Volunteers for Wildlife

Volunteers For Wildlife is a non-profit, volunteer organization, founded in 1982 and dedicated to preserving Long Island, New York's wildlife and natural habitats. We operate a Wildlife Hospital and Education Center at Caumsett State Historic Park in Huntington, NY. We accept and rehabilitate sick, injured, and displaced young wildlife.

Our Wildlife Advisory telephone and email services assist the general public in need of information and help with distressed wild animals. Last year, we received over 3,000 calls.

We have wildlife education programs for Long Island schoolchildren and adults. The participation of our permanently non-releasable birds, animals, and reptiles make these programs an exciting way to learn about Long Island's wildlife.

Volunteers for Wildlife has members all over Long Island and the New York area. We have a network of cooperating veterinarians, who provide initial emergency care to injured and displaced wildlife, and independent licensed wildlife rehabilitators throughout the New York area.

For more information on our organization and contributing your time or making a donation to our cause, visit our website: [www.volunteersforwildlife.org](http://www.volunteersforwildlife.org).

Cottontail rabbits are brought to our hospital throughout the year. Many are orphans, others are injured after being hit by a car or caught by a dog or cat. The average cost of care for a rabbit in our hospital is \$45, and many are left without a donation to support our efforts. You can contribute to the care of any animal in our hospital through our "Help Our Wildlife" program, and animal sponsorships make a great gift! For more information, visit our website, email, or call us at (631) 423-0982.