

COTTONTAIL RABBIT MANAGED SPECIES

(*Sylvilagus floridanus*)

The eastern cottontail was introduced into New England in the late 1800s and early 1900s and has been expanding its range ever since, outcompeting the



Eastern Cottontail Rabbit

Northeastern cottontail which is now an endangered species. The eastern cottontail is now the predominant species of rabbit in much of New England and the east coast of the United States.

Cottontail rabbits are frequently seen around the B-CC IWLA Conservation Farm, especially in brushy and grassy areas in the morning and evenings. They are active during the day, but prefer to remain concealed in shaded areas or in shallow burrows or under brush. They are small 14-17 inches long, weighing 2-3 pounds. Their fur is grayish brown, and they have a distinctive white, stubby, and fluffy “cotton tail” when raised. They

feed on various plants and green vegetation from spring to summer and on bark and twigs during winter. If they have access to gardens or landscaped areas, they will help themselves to all manner of vegetables and ornamental plants.

They can reproduce from March to September in most climates. Females do not dig nest burrows but rather scratch out a slight depression in the ground in an area of dense grass for concealment. They line the nest with fur and dry grass. The gestation period is about 28 days, and cottontails usually have 2 to 4 litters per year with about 3 to 8 young per litter. Young rabbits are born blind, naked, and helpless but grow rapidly, leaving the nest after only 2 to 3 weeks. They are weaned and totally independent at 4 to 5 weeks.

Cottontails have keen eyesight and hearing. When in danger, a rabbit will usually freeze in place until the threat has passed. However, they will flush readily if approached too closely. Rabbits normally move slowly in short hops or jumps, but when frightened they can achieve speeds up to 18 miles per hour over a short distance, often running in a zig-zag to confuse a pursuing predator. Although they do not take to the water often, rabbits are good swimmers. Cottontails will thump the ground with their hind feet regularly, probably as a means of communication. When playing, breeding, or fighting, they often make low purring, growling, or grunting sounds, and if captured they may produce a loud, shrill scream. Because of their high productivity rate, the cottontail rabbit is an important link in the food chain and a principal prey item for many species, including fox, coyote, snakes, and some birds of prey. Depending on its availability, the cottontail can be considered a buffer prey species, meaning if rabbit numbers are high, predators will concentrate on them, thus reducing the pressure on other prey species including domestic animals. The cottontail rabbit is a popular game species throughout its range. Their home range may be up to 20 acres with densities of 4-5 rabbits per acre if the habitat will support them.