

Want More Rabbits?



By Randy Liles, Supervising Wildlife Biologist, Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries,
Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

Cottontail rabbits are found throughout most of Alabama and are considered one of the easiest mammals to manage. Two keys to successful cottontail management are habitat diversity and interspersions. Interspersions is the mixing of habitat types that are essential to successful cottontail populations.

The rabbit is primarily known as an “edge” species, preferring the area where two or more different habitat types meet. The area where a field and forest meet creates such a habitat edge. Cottontails are extremely edge-dependent animals. Because of this, several small areas or patches of food and cover are much more beneficial than one large area containing food and cover. Multiple small areas provide more edge than one large area. When sufficient amounts of quality food and cover exist, cottontail populations are very successful.

Areas that provide adequate cover may include brushy fence-rows, thickets, hayfields, wetland edges, young pine stands, thinned mature pine stands, and ditch banks. The existence (or lack) of good cover may be the greatest single factor that can affect rabbit populations. Good cover provides escape areas from predators, areas to feed and nest, and protection from severe weather, especially in the winter.

In addition to providing excellent escape cover, brush piles supply thermal protection during cold weather. Constructing brush piles is relatively simple, while the best are usually about 5 feet high, 15 feet wide, and have more than one entrance and exit. Plastic pipe (not more than 6 inches in diameter) provides an excellent entrance and exit. Large logs, stumps, or large stones can be used to construct the base. Each additional layer (up to three or four layers) is made up of brush and branches cre-

ating a tangled pile of brush on the top. Brush piles constructed according to recommendations may last up to ten years.

Just as important as proper construction is placement. Brush piles should be located close to hedgerows, windbreaks, brushy thickets, or areas where additional brushy cover is nearby. Supplemental cover can be provided by “live-topping” trees, the practice of cutting a tree trunk on a 30-degree angle about three-quarters of the way through and leaning it to the ground. Because the tree is not cut all the way through, the branches may provide green cover for several years. “Live-topping” a tree next to a brush pile is even better.

Cottontails are herbivores, which means their diet consists of vegetation. Succulent growth of leaves, stems, plant shoots, and flowers are the favorite food of rabbits. As one would expect, food supply (goldenrod, wheat, clover, legumes, soybeans, garden crops, etc.) during the spring and summer months is usually not a limiting factor to rabbit populations. However, with the approach of winter and the disappearance of the rabbit’s preferred food sources, their diets change to the bark and twigs of plant species such as poison ivy, sassafras, maple, dogwood, sumac and apple. If adequate food sources are not available, quarter-acre wildlife openings may be planted. There should be at least one opening for every 2 to 5 acres, which can be planted in clovers, alfalfa, peas, rye, wheat or a mixture of annuals.

Keep in mind that a cottontail spends its entire life within an area no larger than 10 acres. The diversity of both cover and food is the real key to having more rabbits.

For more information contact Randy Liles, Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries, 4101 Highway 21 N., Jacksonville, AL 36265. 📞