

The Eastern cottontail rabbit is the most abundant of four species found in Alabama – the others are swamp rabbit, marsh rabbit and the Appalachian cottontail. It's quick and erratic movement makes it a popular quarry among hunters. Populations have declined in recent decades due, in part, to changes in land-use patterns simplifying the landscape and leaving fewer places where rabbits thrive. Habitat management can increase local populations.



**REPRODUCTION:** Breeding season begins in February and continues into September. Females generally create a small depression in dense grass to nest in an old field or open woodland. The average litter size is 3 – 5, with the largest litters generally born in May and June. Females may produce three to five litters per year. Approximately 50% of the young survive to leave the nest and less than 50% of those survive until fall.

**HABITAT:** The cottontail's home range is less than 10 acres and they prefer diversity in forestland. Provide a mix of low, dense grasses for nesting; forbs, legumes, and grasses for food; and dense escape cover such as honeysuckle, blackberry thickets and brush piles. Intersperse components to minimize travel and exposure to predators. Prescribe burning, mowing and rotational strip disking in grasslands improve habitat conditions. Corners, fencerows, and drainage ditches within row crop fields make good cottontail habitat if maintained in early successional habitat and have little impact on crop production. Cottontails prefer to bed in denser vertical and horizontal vegetation than surrounding areas but select microhabitats to minimize effects of weather.

Food plots are not proven to increase rabbit survival or reproduction; however, use in the winter is generally high. Roadsides, firebreaks, and food plots planted in clovers, vetch, browntop millet, wheat, oats or other preferred foods attract rabbits. Locate food plots adjacent to escape cover.

**POPULATION MANAGEMENT:** Although rabbits have a high reproductive rate in quality habitat, rabbit populations should be controlled. A harvest rate of less than 25% of the total population will have little negative impact on a healthy rabbit population. Landowners and managers can use repeated spotlight counts to estimate local populations and set harvest goals.

Photo Credit: Claude Jenkins



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