The Marsh rabbit is the smallest rabbit in Georgia and occurs from the Upper
marsh rabbit (Sylvilagus aquaticus), and the Appalachian cottontail (Sylvilagus obscures).  

SPECIES DESCRIPTION  
Eastern Cottontail  
The eastern cottontail is the most common rabbit in Georgia occurring  
throughout the entire state. It has brown to gray fur on its back with a white  
underside and white or “cotton” tail. There is usually a white spot on its forehead, 
the nape of the neck is rusty in color, and the feet are whitish. From head to tail 
adults measure 14-17 inches and weigh 2-4 pounds.

Cottontails breed from February to September, with 80% of the young born from  
April to July. Males are polygamous (i.e., have more than one mate at a time).  
Cottontails are very productive having 3-7 litters per year that range from 4-7 
young per litter. Their gestation period is 25-30 days. Young can start eating 
vegetation after 8 days and are weaned from their mother after 14 days.

The eastern cottontail is active mostly from dusk till dawn. Their annual home  
ranges cover 4-13 acres. Research has shown that cottontails use a variety of 
habitat types ranging from crop fields, oldfields, and pastures to briar and shrub 
thickets. Brush and briar thickets provide important cover from predators and 
mortality rates are greater when rabbits venture into open areas with sparse 
ground cover. Annual mortality rates average around 80% per year. Mammalian 
predators (coyotes, bobcats, foxes, etc.) account for the majority (55%) of 
cottontails’ mortality with avian predators (owls and hawks) next in line (25%) as 
a source of mortality. Most mortality of cottontails occurs during the breeding 
season.

Cottontails use a variety of habitats, but prefer early succession habitats (i.e., a 
mix of grasses, briars, forbs, and shrubs). Early succession habitat can be created 
or maintained by combinations of periodic ground disturbances that maintain 
ground vegetation in a 1-5 year old growth stage. Cottontails, as well as most 
rabbits, feed on a great variety of vegetation. However, rabbit management is 
targeted primarily at managing for quality cover and not food.

Swamp Rabbit  
The Swamp rabbit, often called “cane cutter”, is the largest rabbit in Georgia and 
occurring mostly in the Piedmont region. It has coarse black to rusty-brown fur on 
its back with a white underside. The nape of the neck is small and indistinct, 
while the feet are rusty. From head to tail adults measure 14-17 inches and weigh 
3-5-6 pounds.

Swamp rabbits breed from January to August. Males are polygamous. The 
gestation period lasts 35-40 days. They have 2-5 litters per year, which range in 
size from 1-6. The two most important predators of swamp rabbits include 
domestic dogs and alligators. Other predators include bobcats, coyotes and owls. 
Swamp rabbits are good swimmers, thus when pursued will take to water 
readily. They will nest under logs, at the base of stumps, or in ground 
depressions. Unlike other rabbits in Georgia, swamp rabbits can be territorial. 
Swamp rabbits are found usually near water and wetlands, such as beaver ponds, 
swamps, marshes, floodplains, canebrakes and wet bottomlands. They can cover 
5-19 acres over a year.

Marsh Rabbit  
The Marsh rabbit is the smallest rabbit in Georgia and occurs from the Upper 
Coastal Plain to the coast. It has coarse blackish to reddish-brown back with a 
brownish-gray underside. Its ears, feet and tail are smaller than the other species. 
From head to tail adults measure 14-16 inches and weigh 2-3.5 pounds.

Marsh rabbits breed from February to September. Males are polygamous. The 
gestation period lasts 30-37 days. They have 2-4 litters per year and litter sizes range 
from 2-5. Documented predators of Marsh rabbits include bobcats, owls, hawks, 
eagles, rattlesnakes and water moccasins. Marsh rabbits are mostly nocturnal and 
like swamp rabbits readily takes to water. Marsh rabbits are typically associated with 
marsh type habitat such as wet bottomlands, swamps, and hammocks, hence the 
name marsh rabbit.

Appalachian Cottontail  
The Appalachian cottontail is the rarest rabbit in Georgia. Geographically, Georgia 
represents the southern end of its range and therefore populations are low and it is 
included on Georgia’s Protected Wildlife List. It is similar in appearance as the 
Eastern cottontail, but has smaller round ears and a black spot between its black-
edged ears. From head to tail adults measure 15.5-17 inches and weigh 2.5-3 pounds.

Appalachian cottontails breed from March to September. Males are polygamous. 
The gestation period lasts 28 days. They have 3-4 litters per year and litter sizes range 
from 3-8. Most predators of other rabbits in Georgia that occur in the N.E. mountains 
of Georgia such as coyote, fox, bobcat, hawks, and owls most likely prey on 
Appalachian cottontail.

Appalachian cottontail distribution is limited to N.E. GA (Fannin, Rabun, Towns, 
and Union counties) in high (≥ 3,000’ in elevation) rough mountain terrain with 
brushy areas mixed with open forests, such as heath balds and forests heavy in 
mountain laurel and blueberry shrub cover. Like other rabbits, they are primarily 
nocturnal and are never move far from dense cover. They cover 0.5-2 acres over a 
year.

NUISANCE AND DISEASE  
In some situations, rabbits may cause damage to garden crops, as well as nursery and 
orchard seedlings. Fencing or repellents are good solutions to preventing damage.

All these rabbit species can carry a variety of external and internal parasites including: 
ticks, fleas, bot fly larvae (i.e., wolves or warbles), chiggers, tapeworms, roundworms, 
flatworms, and protozoa. In general, hunters should not allow their dogs to consume 
rabbit intestines. Rabbits with wolves or warbles are safe for human consumption 
because the larvae are in the skin of the rabbit and not in the meat.

Also, the Sylvilagus rabbits are known reservoirs of Tularemia (i.e., Rabbit fever-most 
common in Spring and Fall) and Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever. Rabbits infected 
with tularemia typically have white spots all over the liver. Most often humans 
become infected eating undercooked rabbit meat or handling sick rabbits. Hunters 
should wear gloves when preparing rabbits for consumption and rabbit meat should 
be cooked until it is well done. If you suspect you have been exposed to a tularemia 
infecte rabbit, save the rabbit and contact a physician.

UTILIZATION  
The Sylvilagus rabbits are important game animals in Georgia. They also provide 
numerous hours of recreation and meat for consumption. Based on hunter surveys 
by the Wildlife Resources Division rabbit hunting was very popular in the 1960’s 
with 117,000 hunters harvesting 1.27 million rabbits annually. However, due to 
large-scale habitat changes rabbit populations have declined and so has the number of 
rabbit hunters. In 2002-2003 41,657 hunters harvested 325,757 rabbits. Currently, 
rabbits rank third in small game hunting popularity behind doves and squirrels.

For more information, contact a WRD Game Management Office or call (770) 918-6416.  
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