

Rabbit Fact Sheet

INTRODUCTION

Rabbits are members of the Leporidae family with four species occurring in Georgia: the eastern cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*), the swamp rabbit (*Sylvilagus aquaticus*), the marsh rabbit (*Sylvilagus palustris*), and the Appalachian cottontail (*Sylvilagus obscurus*).

SPECIES DESCRIPTION

Eastern Cottontail

The eastern cottontail is the most common rabbit in Georgia occurring throughout the entire state. It has dense 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 about 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 occurs 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 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 blackedged 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 cottontails 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 infected 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.