

# You Can Help!



Yellow warblers nest in young forest habitat./Tom Berriman

Become a well-informed advocate for New England's native rabbit and other young forest wildlife by visiting [www.newenglandcottontail.org](http://www.newenglandcottontail.org), [www.youngforest.org](http://www.youngforest.org), and [www.timberdoodle.org](http://www.timberdoodle.org).

Support habitat projects on public and private lands – projects that often yield jobs, revenue, and sustainable, locally produced timber products along with more and better opportunities for birdwatching, hunting, and viewing wildlife.

Want to make some young forest? Most land in the Northeast is privately owned, so landowners can help wildlife in a big way by signing up to create habitat. Town select boards and conservation commissions can propose projects on municipal lands, and land trusts can make young forest on holdings they manage. Contact your state's wildlife agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, the U.S.D.A. Natural Resources Conservation Service, or a certified forester to learn more. For some projects, full or partial funding may be available.

A Publication of the Wildlife Management Institute.



Cover image: Victor Young, New Hampshire Fish & Game

# Restoring a Rare Rabbit

## Helping New England's Cottontail



[www.newenglandcottontail.org](http://www.newenglandcottontail.org)  
[www.youngforest.org](http://www.youngforest.org)  
[www.timberdoodle.org](http://www.timberdoodle.org)

# Saving a New England Native

In the early twentieth century, the New England cottontail's population may have topped a million animals, and the species' range stretched as far north as northern Vermont. Today perhaps 10,000 of these so-called "brush rabbits" remain, in parts of southern Maine and New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New York east of the Hudson River.

The greatest threat to the New England cottontail's continued existence is a loss of young forest and shrubland – areas of thick, dense vegetation where rabbits can find food, rear young, escape predators, and survive winter's snow and cold. In the past, nature created a steady supply of young forest. But nowadays we don't let wildfires burn unchecked, or beavers flood large areas and kill trees, or undammed rivers release spring floods that

scour off forested lowlands. As a result, there's no longer enough young, vigorously regrowing forest for the New England cottontail and the more than 60 other kinds of wildlife that need the same habitat.

But help is on the way. Conservationists are working with land trusts, towns, companies, foresters, and private landowners to make young forest for the animals that need it. Mammals like bobcats and snowshoe hares. Birds like brown thrashers, indigo buntings, woodcock, and whip-poor-wills. Reptiles such as box turtles and green snakes. Insects like buckmoths and frosted elfin butterflies. Young forest also supplies critically important food and cover for many more-common animals, including white-tailed deer, ruffed grouse, wild turkeys, and a variety of songbirds.



**Conservationists are working with land trusts, towns, companies, foresters, and private landowners to make young forest for the animals that need it.**



# To Have a Diversity of Wildlife, We Need a Diversity of Habitat



Dense scrub oak offers good habitat on Cape Cod./Charles Fergus

Most folks know that wetlands and mature forests are needed to keep our land and wildlife populations healthy. Another kind of habitat is less well known but just as important: overgrown fields, shrubby swamps, coastal shrubland, and dense stands of small trees growing back following fires, storms, and other disturbances. A general term for this habitat is “young forest.”

New England cottontails thrive in such thick, food-rich places. Today young forest and shrubland are hard to find, especially in sizable tracts. As a result, the New England cottontail’s population has fallen drastically.

People say “I see rabbits all the time, why all the talk about ‘saving’ them?” In fact, the rabbits most often seen on lawns or crossing roads are Eastern cottontails, a different species. Eastern cottontails were introduced from the Midwest into the New England states in the early twentieth century. It turns out they can live in smaller, thinner patches of cover than our native cottontails require. (Today, the presence of Eastern cottontails may prevent young New England cottontails from occupying new habitat as it becomes available.)

## Science and Collaboration are Key

Researchers use DNA analysis of rabbit droppings and monitor radio-collared rabbits to learn where New England cottontails live and how they move across the land and interact with other animals, including predators and Eastern cottontails. Satellite evaluation of land-use patterns guides managers to the best places for creating and protecting habitat. And a zoo-based captive breeding program is producing cottontails for reintroduction into new areas of habitat and to boost the health of small, isolated populations.

These science-based, cooperative efforts are designed to make sure that New England’s native rabbit will be around for our children and our children’s children to enjoy. Visit [www.newenglandcottontail.org](http://www.newenglandcottontail.org) to learn



Conservationists have identified Focus Areas (in brown) where preserving and creating young forest and shrubland will provide the greatest benefits to New England cottontails. Focus Area boundaries may change over time./Jeff Tash



Monitoring radio-collared rabbits lets scientists learn how cottontails move across the land and interact with other animals./Brian Tefft

about habitat demonstration areas and the latest research findings on cottontails, and to read *The Conservation Strategy for the New England Cottontail*.

## Young Forest is Natural – and Needed

For most of us, youth is a time of energy and activity, a stage of development that’s vibrant and full of life. The same is true for forests. A young forest is a light-filled place thick with small trees, shrubs, wildflowers, and other low-growing plants. It may look like so much brush, but it provides habitat for a broad range of creatures, including many – like the New England cottontail – whose numbers have been falling.

*Young forest doesn’t last forever – generally around 10 to 20 years – so management activities must be fairly frequent and ongoing. Habitat managers look across the landscape and choose the best spots to make and renew young forest and shrubland for New England cottontails and other wildlife.*

## How Conservationists Make Young Forest

### Harvesting Trees

Timber harvests can look drastic and messy, but right away the stumps and root systems of cut trees start sending up thousands of new shoots. Carefully sited and carried out, timber harvests boost the diversity of tree species and ages, promoting woodland health and providing food and cover for wildlife.

### Planting

Abandoned farm fields can be planted with light-loving native shrubs and trees to make habitat for New England cottontails and other wildlife from tiny warblers to burly bears.

### Mowing Shrubs

Low-impact machines with mulching or mowing heads can chew down old, straggling shrubs. After cutting, the shrubs grow back more densely.

### Controlled Burning

Trained specialists can set fires that knock back older vegetation and increase soil fertility, spurring the regrowth of trees, shrubs, and other plants. Controlled burns also reduce the amount of woody debris on the ground, lowering the risk of dangerous, out-of-control fires.



Volunteers plant native shrubs at Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge in Maine./USFWS