

WILDLIFE

management guide



Wildlife Management Section
South Carolina Department
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Cottontail Rabbit

Cottontail rabbits occur throughout the South from bottomlands and marshes to the highest mountain balds. They thrive in openings wherever shrubs, grasses, and forbs dominate but are scarce in fully-stocked pole and sawtimber stands.

Cottontails are commonly found in old home sites, abandoned orchards, broomsedge fields, sumac patches, honeysuckle thickets, brushpiles and briar patches.

HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

▲ *Food*

Cottontails consume a large variety of forest, pasture, and agricultural plants such as:

alfalfa	clovers
ryegrass	cereal grasses (wheat, rye, oats)
soybeans	Korean lespedeza
dandelion	dogwood
gallberry	grain sorghum
locust	white oak
sassafras	sumac

Sumac is chiefly important in late winter because of the high fat content of the bark.

▲ *Cover*

Cottontails prefer open areas with low ground cover of shrubs and herbaceous vegetation. Tunnel holes, briar patches, and brushpiles are needed for escape cover. Nests are usually in grass or herbaceous cover.

Rabbits are one of the most highly sought-after prey species of many mammal and avian predators. Rabbits can generally withstand heavy predation if suitable habitat is present. As long as the habitat is suitable, predation will probably not significantly decrease populations.

▲ *Water*

The cottontail's need for water is met by plant succulence and dew, although rabbits will drink surface water.

▲ *Home Range*

Rabbits have a relatively small home range and good habitat can support one rabbit per acre or more.



STANDARD MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Cut small stands (10 to 20 acres) at regular intervals close to fields and pastures.

Any sawtimber rotation is suitable if stands are open enough to permit good understory growth.

▲ *Regeneration*

Clearcuts, seed tree and shelterwood cuts create good rabbit habitat.

▲ *Intermediate Treatments*

Initially thin about 60 percent of the canopy in stands composed of >8 inch dbh and 50 percent in smaller diameters, and then frequently thereafter to stimulate understory growth throughout the life of stands.

▲ *Prescribed Burning*

Burning improves the nutrition and palatability of food plants. Burn pine stands at 3-5 year intervals December through February. Do not burn in pure hardwood stands.

OTHER SPECIES THAT BENEFIT FROM RABBIT MANAGEMENT

Numerous other game and nongame species benefit from rabbit management practices. Management plans should emphasize the communities that are associated with rabbits, rather than rabbits alone.

The following species are common rabbit associates:

bobwhite quail	field sparrow
white-tailed deer	red-tail hawk
gray and red fox	meadowlark
yellow-breasted chat	Indigo bunting
black rat snake	cotton rat



DIRECT IMPROVEMENTS TO HABITAT

Maintain openings and old house sites. Prune abandoned orchards, and leave peripheral sumac clumps, honeysuckle thickets and brushpiles. Bushhog portions of briar thickets every two or three years.

Plant 1/8 to 1/4 acre strips in annual and perennial food crops (grain sorghum, wheat, rye and clover are good) in areas with too little cropland.

Plant shrubs within open fields, along borders, fence rows and other idle land areas.

Construct brushpiles where additional cover is needed. Short, broken pipes, concrete blocks, and old pallets can be used as a base for cut trees or other debris. Build brushpiles several feet high and 20-30 feet in diameter.

“Live” brushpiles can be created from living cedars, hollies, and other productive species by cutting 1/2 way through their stems and staking the tree top at ground level.



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