



# DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

## INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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### COTTONTAIL RABBIT, POPULAR GAME ANIMAL, BEING STUDIED BY EXPERTS

Cottontail rabbits, among the most popular small-game animals in the 48 States, are getting expert attention from investigators of the Iowa and Missouri Wildlife Cooperative Research Units, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service. The Units are studying how to maintain breeding stocks that will yield an annual surplus for hunters.

A 4-year study by the Iowa unit showed that intensively tilled land is a poor environment for cottontails, having only 20 to 40 rabbits a section (640 acres). The best lands for these rabbits are lands that are partially tilled and partly waste and well-thicketed. These latter areas had 800 to 1,000 rabbits a section.

A nesting cottontail, Iowa investigators found, takes no chances of getting caught out in the open. The average nest in tall grass or weeds dense enough to conceal an adult was 71 feet from woody or other protective cover, but the average nest in short grass was only 32 feet from protective cover.

Each of 17 nests under observation by the Iowa unit had an average of 6.4 young a year. In a 2-year investigation, the Missouri group found an average of 4.4 young in a litter, but each female cottontail had an average of 3.8 litters, or about 16.7 young a year.

Nesting begins around March 1 and continues until early in August. The end of the cottontail breeding season is early in September, when the last litters are

born. It is said that a young rabbit reaches minimum adult weight in 4-1/2 to 5 months.

In a recent study, the Michigan Department of Conservation found that reducing the cottontail's range for farming and other purposes also reduced the rabbit population. While the rabbits have not increased, the number of hunters has tripled since 1916, the Michigan Department said. In 1937, Michigan hunters killed 2,300,000 cottontails, and in 1938, they bagged 2,500,000.

Local groups sponsoring management projects are directly benefited because the cottontail is a local animal. The known home range of this rabbit is reported to be 1.4 acres for males and 1.2 acres for females, indicating the species rarely migrates.

Sportsmen often restock hunting areas by importing rabbits from other States. Game managers believe this is not the best method of meeting the problem. It is pointed out that careful management of the available supply, principally by making the habitat suitable to the rabbit's requirements and harvesting only surplus stock, will satisfactorily maintain and increase the local population.

Importations from other States, it is believed, may be harmful because the outside stock may introduce diseases that formerly had not been prevalent in the area.

The principal disease of cottontail rabbits is tularemia, which decimated as much as 90 percent of the rabbits in some Iowa counties last year while, at the same time, not affecting the animals in adjoining counties.

The Cooperative Wildlife Research units carrying on rabbit studies are financially sponsored by the Iowa State College, the University of Missouri, the Iowa Conservation Commission, the Missouri Conservation Commission, the American Wildlife Institute, and the Fish and Wildlife Service.