

## We Need Your Help!



Yellow warblers nest in young forest habitat./Tom Berriman

**Want to see more young forest habitat for wildlife? Most land in the Northeast is privately owned, so landowners can help wildlife in a big way by signing up to create habitat. You can find a list of professionals to help you at [newenglandcottontail.org](http://newenglandcottontail.org). Full or partial funding is available for most projects.**

**Become an advocate for New England's native rabbit and other young forest wildlife by supporting habitat projects on public lands--projects that often yield jobs, revenue and sustainable, locally produced timber products along with more opportunities for birdwatching, hunting and viewing wildlife. Please encourage your town select board or conservation commission to propose habitat projects on municipal lands, or ask land trusts to do so on lands that they manage.**

**Visit [www.newenglandcottontail.org](http://www.newenglandcottontail.org) to learn more.**

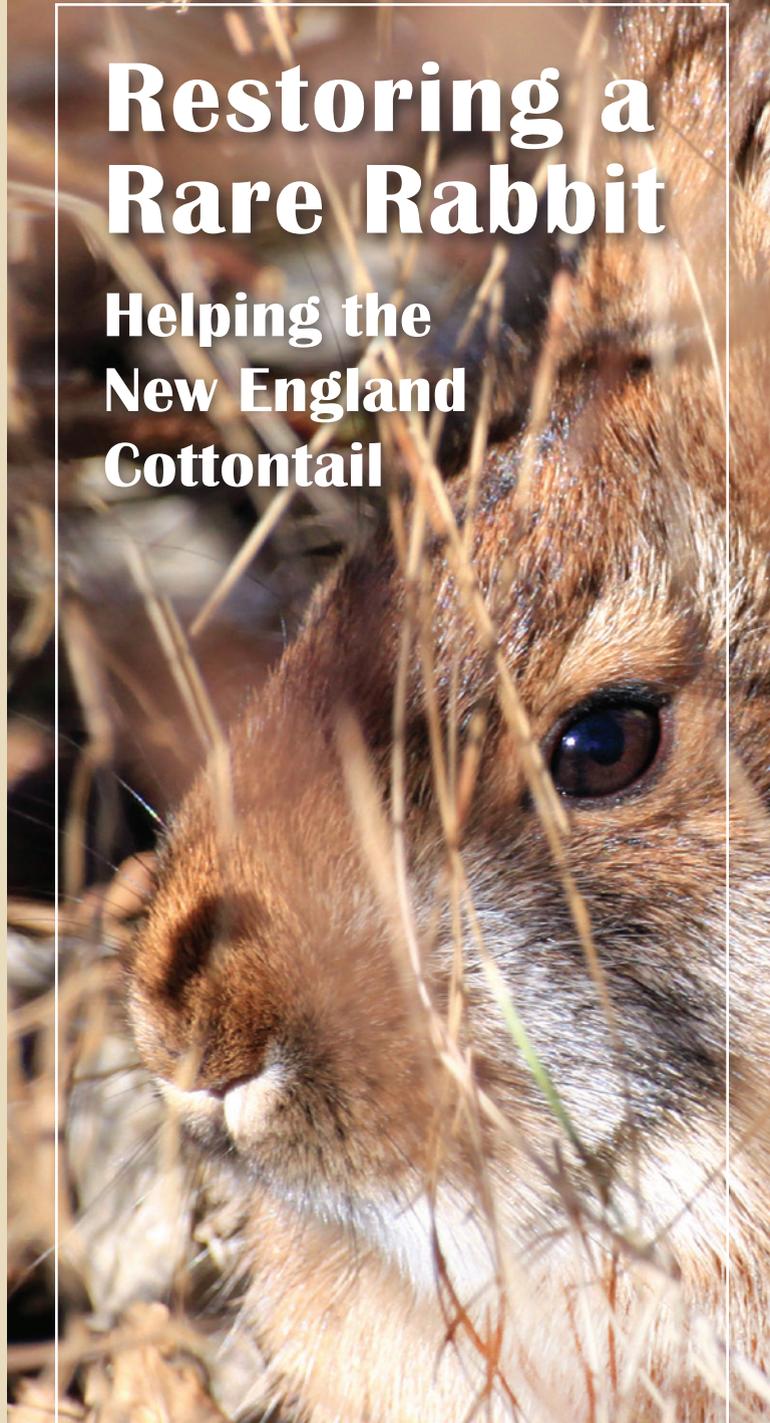
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Cover image: Victor Young, New Hampshire Fish & Game

# Restoring a Rare Rabbit

## Helping the New England Cottontail



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

# Young Forest is the Key

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.



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



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

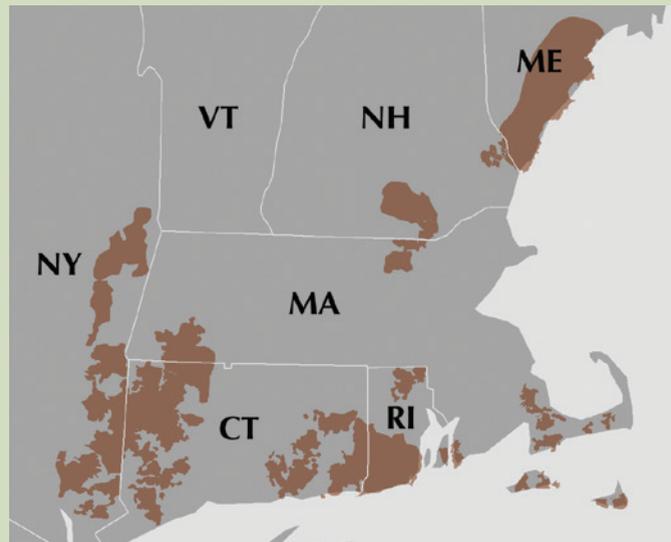
## Young Forest is Natural—and Needed

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.”

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. Today this kind of habitat is hard to find, especially in sizable tracts. If no action is taken, the populations of many kinds of wildlife will keep falling.

## Why the Fuss Over Rabbits?

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 that was introduced into New England from the Midwest. The New England cottontail is the only rabbit native to this area and is an important part of our natural heritage. Moreover, creating habitat to save this native rabbit will also help more than 60 birds and animals that rely on young forest habitat.



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

***Young forest doesn't last forever – generally around 10 to 20 years – so management activities must be fairly frequent and ongoing.***



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

## Science and Collaboration Drive Restoration Efforts

Scientists, conservationists and landowners are working together to ensure that New England's native rabbit will be around for our children and our children's children to enjoy. 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. 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. Visit [www.newenglandcottontail.org](http://www.newenglandcottontail.org) to learn the latest research findings on cottontails and read about our conservation efforts.

## 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 important 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