

# THE NEW ENGLAND COTTONTAIL

A M A I N E R A R I T Y



Photo credit: A. Tur/USFWS

## HABITAT IN SHORT SUPPLY

Thickets with a dense, brushy understory that develop several years after a disturbance such as fire, forest harvesting, or the abandonment of farmland are places that the NEC calls home. These habitats are short-lived (lasting 20-25 years) because their structure changes as sun-loving shrubs and densely-growing saplings are shaded out by taller trees. Once canopy closure occurs, the understory becomes more open, creating habitat that is unsuitable for the NEC. Therefore, continual disturbance somewhere on the landscape is necessary for the NEC to survive.

While it may seem “messy”, the early-successional habitat that the NEC utilizes is an important landscape component and is critical to maintaining wildlife and vegetative diversity at a broader scale. Other wildlife also require this habitat and are impacted by its loss. Almost one half of the over 40 birds associated with early-successional habitat, such as the Eastern Towhee, prairie warbler, and the American Woodcock, are undergoing population declines. These shrubby habitats also contain higher proportions of state-listed butterflies and moths than other natural community types.

## ADDRESSING LANDOWNER CONCERNS

Landowners managing for declining species should not be penalized for their good deeds. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) has a program under which participating landowners who commit to taking steps to help candidate species such as the NEC now can be assured that if the species is federally listed, they will face no new management requirements. The agreement, known as a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA), is one of the tools that the USFWS uses to encourage and support management for imperiled species on private lands. To learn more about CCAA, go to <[www.conservationforestry.org/States/States\\_Maine.cfm](http://www.conservationforestry.org/States/States_Maine.cfm)>.

The Maine Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife is exploring options for providing landowners assurances for land use, if they have state-listed species on their land. However, to date, Maine has not developed a landowner assurances mechanism.



1111 Nineteenth Street N.W., Suite 780  
Washington, D.C. 20036  
P: 202.463.2462 • F: 202.463.2461  
[www.conservationforestry.org](http://www.conservationforestry.org)  
Email: [info@conservationforestry.org](mailto:info@conservationforestry.org)

Front cover photo credit: Anne Schnell



Forests for Watersheds & Wildlife is the habitat conservation program of the American Forest Foundation, a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization.



If you've seen a cottontail rabbit in Maine, you've spotted a rare and unique species. The New England cottontail (NEC) rabbit is the only native cottontail in New England and the only cottontail found in Maine. It was once abundant throughout many northeastern states; however, during the mid-20th century, its distribution declined dramatically. Today, the NEC's entire range is estimated at 4,700 square miles, roughly an 86% reduction from its historic range. In Maine, the NEC is currently found only in York and Cumberland counties, occupying roughly 17% of its historic state range.

Research points to the loss or fragmentation of large patches (>10 acres) of early-successional habitat (thickets and shrubs with a dense understory) that the NEC utilizes as reasons for its decline. Patch size is important, as NEC utilizing smaller habitat patches experience higher levels of predation and disease. Larger patches of shrubby habitat provide sufficient nesting, food, and escape cover. Suitable habitat has been lost to development, degraded by invasive plants, or has matured into forested land.

Due to the decline of the NEC and its habitat, the species is listed as endangered in Maine and is also a candidate for federal listing under the Endangered Species Act.

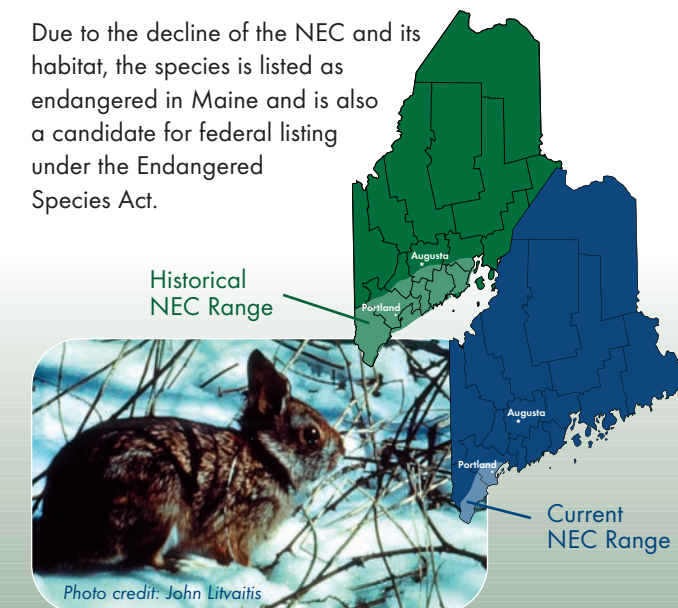


Photo credit: John Litvaitis

# THE NEW ENGLAND COTTONTAIL

## HOW CAN LANDOWNERS HELP?

Active and ongoing management of early-successional habitat is needed to help protect the NEC. With most of the remaining suitable or potentially-suitable habitat found on private lands, landowners can play an important role. If enough landowners specifically manage for the NEC, it may no longer be necessary to consider this species for federal listing.

The management approach a landowner uses to create habitat will depend upon existing conditions. To prevent canopy closure, and establish a dense understory, potential activities include: management of regeneration following a clearcut or shelterwood harvest, prescribed fire, brush hogging, selective tree thinning or selective herbicide application to trees.

Some landowners may not have enough property to manage a large patch (>10 acres) of habitat for the NEC. However, their management efforts in concert with neighboring landowners may collectively provide enough suitable habitat. In addition, active management by landowners can help augment existing, nearby suitable habitat such as the brushy habitat found along a power line, highway, railroad corridor, or a wetland area.

### Conservation Forestry Awareness Sign:

If you have created, or plan to create, early-successional habitat to benefit the NEC, you may be eligible to receive a conservation forestry awareness sign. If you are interested in learning more, visit: [www.conservationforestry.org/States/States\\_Maine.cfm](http://www.conservationforestry.org/States/States_Maine.cfm)



## TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

A number of local, state, and federal organizations exist that can provide technical and financial assistance related to managing for the NEC. The websites listed below can provide you with more information about these organizations and the work they do.

Maine Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife:

[www.maine.gov/ifw](http://www.maine.gov/ifw)

USFWS - Endangered Species Program:

[www.fws.gov/endangered](http://www.fws.gov/endangered)

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service:

[www.me.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.me.nrcs.usda.gov)

Partners for Fish & Wildlife:

[ecos.fws.gov/partners](http://ecos.fws.gov/partners)

Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge:

[www.fws.gov/northeast/rachelcarson](http://www.fws.gov/northeast/rachelcarson)

Wells National Estuarine Research Reserve:

[www.wellsreserve.org](http://www.wellsreserve.org)

Environmental Defense:

[www.environmentaldefense.org](http://www.environmentaldefense.org)

York County Soil & Water Conservation District:

[www.yorkswcd.org](http://www.yorkswcd.org)

## COST-SHARE ASSISTANCE

Several federal and state cost-share programs provide assistance to landowners for developing, improving or managing wildlife habitat for species with declining populations, such as the NEC. To learn more about assistance available through organizations such as the Maine Natural Areas program, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Partners for Fish & Wildlife and others, visit [www.conservationforestry.org/States/States\\_Maine.cfm](http://www.conservationforestry.org/States/States_Maine.cfm) for direct links to cost-share information.

## LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE

A number of strategies are being considered to further involve private landowners in management for the NEC:

**Habitat Credits:** The feasibility of a habitat credit system is being explored as a means to facilitate NEC recovery efforts. A habitat credit system is a market-based approach that would compensate landowners who protect and enhance the habitat of the NEC.

*To determine if a habitat credit system would work, we need to find out what management strategies will appeal to landowners and also benefit the NEC. If you are interested in helping NEC conservation efforts, please consider participating in a landowner focus group that will help identify which conservation approaches will work best for landowners.*

*If you would be willing to participate in a mail or telephone survey, please email [info@conservationforestry.org](mailto:info@conservationforestry.org).*



Photo credit: © James Flynn, Jr.

*Songbirds such as the prairie warbler (above) and game species such as the American woodcock (right) benefit from the management of early-successional habitat.*

**Conservation Easements:** A conservation easement is a voluntary, legally-binding agreement that limits certain activities or prevents development on a piece of property now and in the future, protecting the many ecological services, such as clean water and wildlife habitat, which the property provides. Easements, in combination with active management, are a powerful tool to permanently conserve NEC habitat.

**NEC Relocation:** The Maine Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife is investigating the process by which New England cottontail relocation may occur in Maine.

## WANT TO LEARN MORE?

To learn more about the New England cottontail, early-successional habitat, habitat credits and CCAA visit [www.conservationforestry.org/States/States\\_Maine.cfm](http://www.conservationforestry.org/States/States_Maine.cfm) and look for the New England cottontail link to access relevant articles and websites.

Photo credit: Richard Baetsen/UFWWS