

ON THE WILD SIDE

Footprints in the snow tell a tale of cottontails

Frances Shirley

When light snow dusts my driveway in the morning, I always see two sets of tracks. One is evenly spaced, right and left feet alternating where a cat ambled along inspecting its territory. The other set is distinctive: two prints close together, then two longer prints ahead and more widely spaced. This pattern, short front and longer back prints, is made by a cottontail rabbit. It is repeated every six or eight inches and heads from the protective dead branches around the base of a lilac bush near the house toward some shrubs behind the driveway. Had the cat been in pursuit, the distance between the widely spaced hind feet pushing off, and front feet landing close together would have been over twelve inches long.

Unlike some of the other inhabitants of my backyard, such as the woodchucks under the chicken house, the cottontails keep active all year round. They nibble the bark around the base of the roses and other shrubs, or bite off and eat the tender parts they can reach.

We've all heard the phrase: "reproducing like rabbits", well, in spring and summer this fecundity becomes evident. The slightly burlier buck bunnies bounce around their territories, showing off and mating with several females. After mating, females find suitable spots to make their scrapes (bunny beds.) These consist of shallow depressions in weeds or long grass, usually near shrubbery. The doe lines the scrape with more grass and some fur or other soft material. Longer grass is arranged over the top so the tiny babies are completely hidden, except from their mother. It's not long before the young are nibbling grass and clover and needing less and less of their mother's milk. They are independent in about four or five weeks and the mother can prepare for another litter.



Cottontails can be spotted throughout the winter

When I come into the driveway in the early summer, I may startle a grazing buck rabbit who will always bound off. The doe, however, will only move a few steps, a sure sign that she has a nest nearby. I was surprised at how long this protective behavior lasts. Last November, we were tagging trees at the old Jackson Nursery/Nine Lives building in an attempt to save some of them for the Tricentennial Park we plan to develop there. Phil Zawasky moved a sheet of plywood from the fence, and behind it was a half-grown cottontail, well hidden among the leaves. Like all prey animals, its large eyes were set high on its head. It stared at us unblinkingly and remained absolutely still. A few feet away I spotted the mother. She moved a short distance and stopped as if inviting me to follow her and move away from her young one. As I walked in her direction, she moved a little

beginning to make a circle so she could remain close to the young one, but far enough away to draw off any threat.

In summer there always seems to be a couple of rabbits in my yard so I assumed they were not endangered. On WBUR one morning, however, I learned that in New England we have two species of cottontails – the native New England cottontail (*Sylvilagus transitionalis*) which Massachusetts Fish and Wildlife considers threatened, and the Eastern Cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*,) which is becoming more abundant. The New England variety, with its slightly smaller eyes and ears and darker coat, is not easy to distinguish from the Eastern cottontail. The New England cottontail needs thicker shrub and undergrowth than its Eastern cousin. As New England forests age, the underbrush thins and no longer meets the needs of the native bunny. The Eastern cottontails (sometimes sporting a white spot on the forehead) are more successful because they can live in more open areas and see predators more quickly.

Keeping an area with thick brush and a tangle of vines somewhere on your property will give the New England bunnies a better chance. If you are worried that they will eat a few of your prize roses or border shrubs, such as azaleas, some chicken wire around the plants in winter is adequate protection.

The Land Preservation Society (LPS) of Norton encourages you to help ensure good habitat for the small mammals that are an important part of our local food chains and our heritage. Register your yard as a Certified Wildlife Habitat with the National Wildlife Federation (NWF.) Visit the LPS website: www.nortonlandpreservation.org/ or go to the NWF website: www.nwf.org/In-Your-Backyard.aspx

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