

LIVING WITH WILDLIFE

Humane, Effective Solutions to Human-Wildlife Conflicts

A Program of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals



Cottontail Rabbits

In cities, suburbs, and small towns across Massachusetts, people are noticing a change in their neighborhoods. Some think it's good. Some think it's bad. But everybody seems to be talking about it: more wild animals are making their homes in and around people's yards and houses, in parks and playgrounds, in business developments, even right on Main Street.

General Information

Two types of cottontail rabbits live in Massachusetts: the more common Eastern Cottontail and the New England Cottontail. These two animals look a lot alike but do differ slightly in appearance.

Cottontails like to live in brushy "edge" areas, such as in fields bordering woodlands, brush piles, and thickets. They survive well in the suburbs because they get all they need for food, water, and shelter there.

Eastern Cottontails are sexually mature at about 2 months of age and breed from April to September. They usually have 3 to 4 litters of about 5 young, called kittens. New England Cottontails are sexually mature at age 2, breed from March to about August, and have 3 litters a year.

Nests typically are made in small depressions in the ground and are lined with grass and fur from the mother.

In the springtime concerned people often mistake kittens left alone to be orphaned. Remember, it is quite common for kittens to temporarily be left alone while their parents are out foraging. The parents conceal their kittens and return to the nest to feed and care for them only at dusk and dawn. If you find a nest of kittens, it is best to leave it alone, unless it is facing imminent danger. You should not touch or even approach a nest of kittens, as the scent of a human will often deter parents from reclaiming their kittens and may attract predators. It is best to watch from a safe distance and observe until the parent returns, which could take several hours.

Cottontails are most active at dawn and dusk and forage for food into the early nighttime hours. In the spring and summer they eat grasses and leafy plants and in the fall and winter they primarily eat buds, twigs, bark, and young trees.

Possible Conflicts and Solutions

Damage to gardens and ornamental shrubbery is the most common conflict between humans and rabbits.

Rabbit damage to plants is identifiable by the neatly-clipped appearance of browsed vegetation, as well as obvious animal tracks and scat in the form of small piles of pea-sized pellets.

The most effective way to keep rabbits out of a flower or vegetable garden is to erect a fence around the garden 2 to 3 feet high. This is best done using chicken wire or hardware cloth (a heavy gauge woven wire mesh fencing material) staked about every 4 feet and buried into the ground at least 8 inches (preferably 12 inches) with a bend at the bottom to prevent animals from burrowing underneath. Chicken wire and hardware cloth can be purchased at most gardening and hardware stores.

Commercial repellants with the active ingredients ziram, thiram, capsaicin, or dentonium saccharide may work to repel rabbits in the yard or garden but remember to read labels before using these products on plants that will be eaten. Also, attaching a motion sensor to your garden hose will encourage rabbits to look elsewhere for their next meal.

The following homemade hot pepper repellent can also be effective, when applied to flower bulbs and plants: Ingredients: 1 chopped yellow onion, 1 chopped jalapeno pepper, and 1 tablespoon Cayenne pepper. Directions: Boil ingredients for 20 minutes in 2 quarts of water. Let it cool and strain through cheesecloth. Apply with spray bottle. This homemade repellent will deter any animal where it is applied and will last

3 to 5 days. This recipe is courtesy www.UrbanWildlifeRescue.org. If using this mixture with a vegetable garden make sure to wash vegetables well before eating them.

Remember that this homemade repellent and other repellents need to be reapplied regularly, as well as after rain, in order to be effective. Remember to always follow the directions on any commercial product purchased.

Keeping grass mowed short and removing ground cover near the garden also helps limit rabbit movement and reduce damage. Sprinklers triggered by motion detectors can also encourage rabbits to look elsewhere for their next meal. These devices can be purchased from most gardening stores.

Protect tree bark from rabbit chewing by wrapping trees with hardware cloth or wire mesh. The cloth or mesh should be wrapped loosely around the

THE LIVING WITH WILDLIFE MISSION

The MSPCA Living With Wildlife program aims to protect wild species, now and in the future. The program promotes peaceful coexistence between people and wildlife in urban, suburban, and rural Massachusetts communities by helping to resolve human-animal conflicts in a humane, nonlethal, long-term and cost-effective manner.

tree with at least 4 inches of space between the tree and the cloth/mesh to allow for growth. It should also extend into the ground about 6 inches, if possible without causing root damage, and about 2 feet above the snow line. Hardware cloth and wire mesh can be purchased from most hardware stores.

Public Health Concerns

Like any mammal, rabbits can get rabies. Rabbits also can be infected with tularemia, which is transmissible to humans if an

infected rabbit is handled or eaten undercooked. Ticks that transmit Rocky Mountain spotted fever may use rabbits as a host.

For more information about humanely solving human-wildlife conflicts or about the MSPCA's Living With Wildlife program, call (617) 522-7400, visit www.LivingWithWildlife.org or e-mail LivingWithWildlife@mspca.org.