

New England Cottontail (*Sylvilagus transitionalis*, no state or federal status)

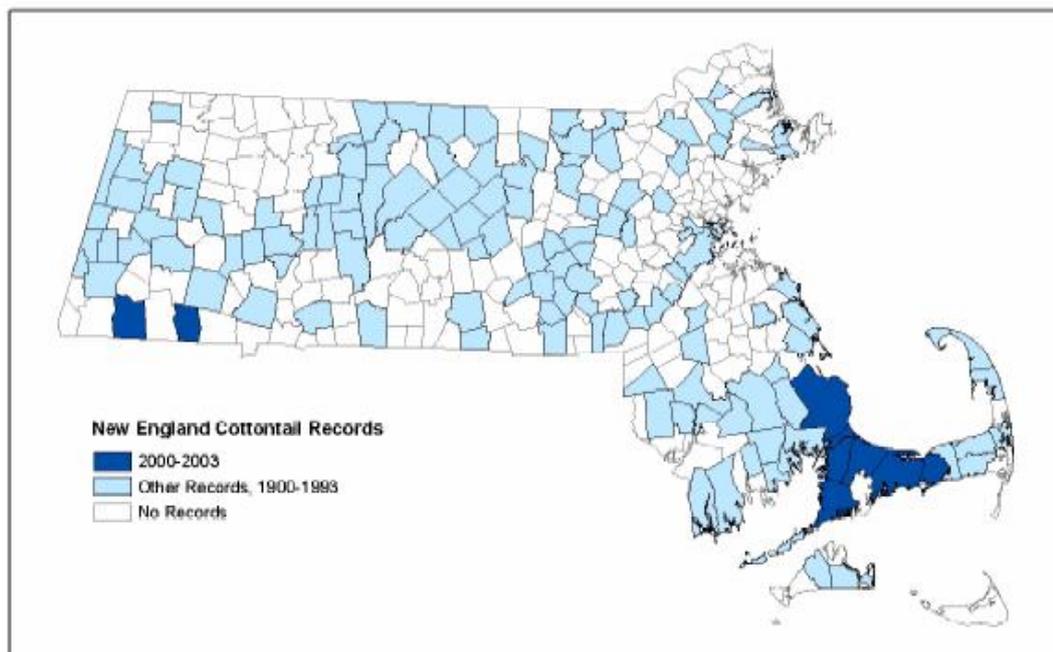
Global Rarity Ranking	State Rarity Ranking	Habitats	Conservation Concern
G4	S4	Young Forests & Shrublands	NE F&W Agencies

Species Description.

The New England Cottontail is a medium-sized cottontail rabbit with dark-brown to buffy upper parts overlain with distinct black guard hairs. Its ears are short and rounded, with the anterior portion edged in black, and there is a black spot between the ears. Cranial characters, including an irregular suture between the frontals and nasals, and a long slender postorbital process (rarely touching the skull), can reliably distinguish this cottontail from the Eastern Cottontail (*S. floridanus*). New England Cottontails may weigh 1 kg and measure 390 to 430 mm in length.

Distribution and Abundance.

The New England Cottontail was once found statewide in Massachusetts, including in Dukes and Nantucket counties, from which it had vanished by the 1920s. New England Cottontails maintained an overall relative abundance of about 22% of all cottontail specimens obtained during 4 surveys between 1950-1993. However, in the 1990-93 survey, Eastern Cottontails were found in 13 of 14 counties, while *S. transitionalis* was found in only 6. In 2000-2003, no New England Cottontails were found among 183 specimens received from cooperators. However, small populations were reported in Barnstable County and southern Berkshire County by another researcher.



Massachusetts Towns with Recent (2000-2003) and Historical (1900-1993) Occurrences of New England Cottontail

Habitat Description

The New England Cottontail is an early successional or thicket-dwelling species. Suitable habitat can be found in both forests and shrublands, where there is a dense understory with food and cover in close association. Typical

habitats include native shrub associations, beaver flowages, old fields and pastures, and early successional forests. It may also be found in laurel thickets.

Threats

The widespread loss of early successional habitat types is the proximate threat to the New England Cottontail. Residential and commercial development in pitch pine-scrub oak barrens or other early successional communities has also fragmented, degraded, or eradicated habitat for *S. transitionalis*. Fragmentation and diminishment of suitable habitat patches reduces suitable foods, provides less escape cover, and forces New England Cottontails to forage at greater distances than in ideal habitat. Increases in generalist carnivores affect both cottontail species; however, Eastern Cottontails have the ability to forage further from cover and to detect predators at greater distances than do New Englands. New England Cottontails may also be unable to compete with and displace the more adaptable Eastern Cottontail from suitable habitats.

References

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- Smith, D.F., and J.A. Litvaitis. 2000. Foraging strategies of sympatric lagomorphs: implications for differential success in fragmented landscapes. *Canadian Journal of Zoology* 78: 2134-2141.