

Controlling Nuisance: Cottontail Rabbits

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Cottontail rabbits are one of the most commonly observed game animals. The upper body of light brown contrasts with the white belly fur. Long ears and stubby powder-puff tail are distinguishing characteristics. They produce three to four litters of young annually, beginning in late winter and continuing into early fall. Females build a nest the size of a softball, line it with belly fur and suckle the young for two to three weeks, at the end of which time they leave the nest. Rabbits prefer brushy cover interspersed with open areas.

Brushy fence rows, woody stream banks and woodland borders offer good protective cover, while adjacent herbaceous plants offer succulent summer foods. In winter, when food is limited, rabbits clip twigs and gnaw the bark of woody plants. Landscaped yards provide excellent rabbit habitat, and this accounts for the prevalence of cottontails in most suburban and urban areas.

Control

Mechanical methods. Rabbit-proof fences offer practical and inexpensive protection for small areas of high-value plants. You can exclude rabbits from vegetable and flower gardens, nurseries and ornamental plants with an 18- to 24-inch high fence of 1-inch mesh galvanized wire. Temporary posts are satisfactory. The bottom edge of wire must be carefully staked to the ground, or buried several inches, to prevent rabbits from burrowing under the fence. Well-maintained fences offer assurance that rabbits will be excluded during the period the plants require protection.

Tree-trunk guards are effective in preventing rabbit damage to individual trees and shrubs. Cylinders of 1/4-inch mesh hardware cloth 18- to 24-inches high, set into the ground surrounding the trunk, will help prevent gnawing damage to the main stem. Multi-stemmed shrubs should be encircled with hardware cloth or 1-inch mesh wire. Commercial tree wraps and plastic guards are available from garden- and horticultural-supply stores. The wire cylinders and tree wraps will prevent gnawing damage from both rabbits and meadow mice. Guards and wraps are not effective when snow depth is greater than the height of the wire or wrap.

Shooting. Shooting may be used where local laws permit the discharge of firearms. Hunting can be a useful method for landowners to control rabbit numbers.

Trapping. Live trapping may be of some help in removing individual animals causing damage. However, the effectiveness of summer trapping is limited because of the number of young rabbits produced and the difficulty of baiting rabbits into traps when alternative foods are abundant. Winter live trapping, especially during periods of snow, may be more effective because food is limited. Areas showing constant rabbit activity such as tracks or gnawing on woody plants are logical places to set live traps. Metal live traps are available from some farm- and garden-supply stores. Wood box traps can be constructed easily. Apples are suitable baits.

Pesticides. Rabbit repellents are usually a less-than-satisfactory method of protecting plants from rabbit damage. Legal pesticide limitations prevent the use of most repellents on gardens and crops. Restrictions on the labels of nearly all rabbit repellents limit their use primarily to woody plants during the winter season when rabbits are likely to gnaw bark and clip twigs. Winter rains and snows erode and dilute the repellents applied to dormant woody plants. Such woody plants as ornamental trees and shrubs, orchard fruit trees and nursery stock can be protected effectively by fencing, tree guards, or wraps. These mechanical methods assure protection with less cost, time and trouble than repellents.

If repellents are used, they must be applied as directed on the label, with particular attention to dilution, application rates and repeat treatments.

Rabbit Live-Trap

Construction: Order printed guide for illustrated instructions.

To be effective, the rabbit trap should be constructed of fairly good lumber. The door and its guides are critical points, since gravity must close the door after the trigger is tripped. Be sure there is enough space between the guides that the door slides without binding.

Some people extend the guides about 1 inch above the top of the trap to support the door. When the door is raised and the trigger is set, at least 2 inches or more of the door should be in the guide tracks. The opening should be at least 4 inches high. This height can be adjusted by changing the length of the string between the door and lever.

The trigger is not complicated, although it may require some fine-tuning to ensure a quick release when contact is made.

Materials:

Box: All parts can be built from a single 1-by-8-inch board, 10 feet long. Lever: 1 piece 3/4-inch by 3/4-inch by 18-1/2-inch.

Fulcrum: 1 piece 3/4-inch by 3/4-inch by 7-1/2-inch. Guides: 4 pieces 3/4-inch by 3/4-inch by height of sides. Trigger: 3/8-inch to 1/2-inch dowel, 11 inches long.

Location and operation: Rabbits live in areas where good escape cover is available — in brush piles, briar patches and thick fence rows. They also prefer low-cut bluegrass mixed with clovers and shrubs. In order to catch rabbits, the box trap must be placed in or along the runs or trails made by rabbits using these areas.

Opinions vary as to the importance of baits for the box trap. Some prefer baits such as apples, carrots or corn, while others use no bait at all. Baits may attract opossums and skunks in search of an easy meal.

Care should be taken to place the trigger notch on the edge of the hole nearest the door. This will ensure its release when the animal pushes against it upon entering the trap.

Comment: With a little modification in the size during construction, this trap design may be adapted to catch other, larger or even smaller animals. Nuisance animals may be trapped and moved to another area, using the box for transport.

Caution: These traps must be used in accordance with all rules and regulations of the Wildlife Code of Missouri. Certain permits and landowner permission must be obtained before any trapping is done. When in use, the law requires that the traps be checked daily and removed when no longer in use.

Missouri Wildlife Code Rule — 3CSR10-4.130

Owner May Protect Property. Subject to federal regulations governing the protection of property from migratory birds, any wildlife except deer which beyond reasonable doubt is damaging property may be captured or killed by the owner of the property being damaged, or by his agent, at any time and without permit, but only by shooting or trapping except by written authorization of the director. Wildlife may be so controlled only on the owner's property to prevent further damage. Wildlife so captured or killed may not be used, transported, sold or given away but must be reported to an agent of the commission within twenty-four (24) hours and disposed of in accordance with his instructions. Deer that are causing damage may be killed only with the permission of an agent of the commission and by methods authorized by him.

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