

Banding Together to Save the New England Cottontail

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In August of 2012, Great Bay National Wildlife Refuge collaborated with the Wildlife Institute and NH Fish and Game to build a hardening pen for New England cottontail (*Sylvilagus transitionalis*); the only native and unique (endemic) cottontail of New England. The New England cottontail may look like the more commonly seen eastern cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*), but is much more of a habitat specialist. These rabbits require very dense thickets, and hesitate to stray from cover. However, with habitat loss due to development and forest maturation, the New England cottontail population has dramatically declined. Plus, expanding highways and roads have further fragmented their habitat. In many locations, the rabbits are holding out in small patches of habitat making it difficult for them to find food or mates.

This brings us back to the captive breeding program. It may be ironic, but these rabbits do need our help to breed. Working together with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the University of New Hampshire, the University of Rhode Island, and all New England states, the Roger Williams Park Zoo is helping to play matchmaker to the rabbits, hoping that when brought together, the rabbits will



Because there has been significant loss of its required dense thicket habitat, the New England cottontail find itself in need of help.

breed, well, like rabbits! The pilot captive breeding program was initiated in 2011, and several successful litters have come out of the Providence, Rhode Island zoo.

The pen at Great Bay NWR is a one-acre fenced-in area of shrub and thicket habitat where the rabbits can acclimate from their cage living at the zoo to living in the wild. Built to keep most predators out and watched closely by staff, this pen makes it easier for the rabbits than if they were just released to fend for themselves.

On September 19, 2012, lots of excitement swirled around the next group of rabbits to leave the zoo. Heidi Holman, wildlife biologist with New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, loaded up nine rabbits for their ride to the Great Bay NWR. A morning of rain and cold weather had everyone concerned that the transition into the newly created pen would be difficult on the rabbits. But by the time Heidi and the rabbits arrived, the sun was shining – perfect for such a momentous occasion. Staff members from Parker River NWR, and from nearby Rachel Carson NWR, where a lot of work is being done to conserve these rabbits, were on hand to witness the release. Seven pairs of eyes watched anxiously as one by one, each rabbit was taken out of a carrier and placed into their temporary home. They sat a moment, sniffed their new surroundings, and then dashed away into the shrubs.



These two "critter carriers" constitute 1st class travel for New England cottontails making the trek from the zoo in Rhode Island to the hardening pen at Great Bay NWR.

This group of rabbits spent their winter acclimating to the wild in the new pen before being released the following spring at sites in southern New Hampshire in order to supplement wild populations. A second group was brought to the pen in August of 2013 to spend their winter chowing down on twigs within the relative safety of its confines. Although the pen was carefully designed to keep predators out, sometimes animals are smarter than humans. Over the two winters that rabbits were in the pen, several were lost to avian predators, as well as to a fisher that somehow avoided (or ignored) the electric fence wires to climb up and over. Due to this, rabbits only had a short stay in the pen during the summer and fall of 2014 before heading into the wild.

But hope is not lost on the Great Bay hardening pen. Actually, bigger and better things are on the horizon. Adjustments will be made to the pen this spring to further keep predators out. After that happens, a group of four rabbits will be brought in with the hope that they will breed in the pen. This will hopefully be the beginning of a captive breeding program that occurs outside of the zoo, in a more natural environment. Adding additional pens at Great Bay is also a possibility, to further increase the capacity of producing rabbits that can be released to bolster wild populations. Hopefully, one day the New England cottontail will once again be the dominant rabbit of its namesake.



Miscellany Photographica



Common milkweed—one of several native milkweeds that are very important in the life cycle of the monarch butterfly.



A group of “retired” nest boxes that were leaning against a refuge storage building last summer. The tree swallow apparently had not heard that the boxes were no longer being used!