

Volunteers work to restore cottontail habitat

Fosters Daily Democrat

April 26, 2015

By Crystal A. Weyers (cweyers@fosters.com)

<http://www.fosters.com/article/20150426/NEWS/150429456>



Mother-daughter team Pauline and Courtney Bogaert lend a hand planting native shrubs during a volunteer plant day to restore New England cottontail habits in Durham on Saturday. Photo by Crystal A. Weyers/Fosters.com

DURHAM — New England cottontails aren't multiplying like rabbits, despite the common belief that rabbits have no trouble reproducing.

Nearly 40 volunteers met on Saturday, ready and eager to help restore a home for the small, state-endangered creature that is perilously close to extinction in the Granite State.

The group, divided into a morning and afternoon shift, arrived at the Garrison House Farm, made a 15-minute trek into the woods at the back of the property and entered the New Hampshire Audubon's 115-acre Smith Sisters Wildlife Sanctuary.

There, they went to work planting 5,000 native shrubs in a formerly forested area that was clearcut two winters ago to be converted into the type of thicketed habitat that the New England cottontail needs to survive.

The plants, purchased by the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service, included 10 different shrub species: elderberry, dogwoods, Virginia rose, American hazelnut, fragrant sumac, eastern red-cedar, nannyberry and arrowwood viburnum.

"The first rule is that the roots go in the ground," said Keith O'Toole, a student of the University of New Hampshire's Thompson School of Applied Science. O'Toole, and his classmates Josh McGraw and Sean Perreault, served as the planting instructors for the day.

The 9 a.m. shift got off to a good start by planting nearly 1,500 young shrubs in two-and-a-half hours.

"We need all these hands to get 5,000 plants in the ground," said NH Audubon Director of Land Management Phil Brown.

Although the New England cottontail is currently only considered a state-endangered species, it is being considered for federal listing under the Endangered Species Act. It is the only cottontail rabbit native to the Northeast and the Granite State.

"As New Hampshire's forests age, several species of young forest-dependent wildlife — like the New England cottontail — have declined," said UNH Cooperative Extension Wildlife Outreach Program Coordinator Haley Andreozzi.

Andreozzi said that in the 1960s, cottontails could be found throughout southern and central portions of the state. Today, they occupy less than 25-percent of their historic range and number less than 100 in the Seacoast and Merrimack Valley regions.

“Additionally, the habitat conditions the New England cottontail needs are also needed by many other species of wildlife,” she said. “In New Hampshire, young forest and shrub-land habitats are used by more than 100 species of wildlife.”

It is for this reason that the New England cottontail is considered an “umbrella species.” Minimizing loss of its habitat, which it needs for protection from predators, in turn helps countless other species of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and even some insects and plants.

“Overall, New Hampshire’s character has changed from formerly being more pastoral and brushy to more woods and open fields,” said Brown. “There’s no middle ground.”

Volunteers donated their time and labor for a variety of reasons.

UNH Master Gardener Pauline Bogaert and her daughter Courtney Bogaert thought it would be nice to get outside and help support the environment.

“I feel sorry for endangered species of any kind,” said Pauline. “If I can help, I’ll be out there doing it. It’s a worthwhile project. They’re so cute, the poor little things.”

Three members of Nashua’s Boy Scout Troop 773 also participated with some of their parents. The opportunity helped earn them their Mammal Study merit badge as well as racked up some volunteer hours.

“My son was pretty excited this morning about a different experience, something they haven’t done before,” said Brenda Matthews of her 11-year-old Scout Ethen.

Eight-year-old Grace Kasper, of Lee, has been working to save the New England cottontail for two years. Her older brother Grant had done a fundraiser for bats and she wanted to get in on the animal-saving action.

“I always liked bunnies, they were my favorite animal,” she said. Grace’s mother Katrin Kasper added that it all began because her comfort toy is a cuddly arctic hare.

In addition to previously helping weed out invasive species to ensure the growth of a cottontail-friendly habitat, Grace has also developed a special connection to the Roger Williams Park Zoo in Rhode Island. There, biologists are breeding the rabbits in captivity and then releasing them into the wild to help restore the population. Grace was invited to see the baby cottontails before their release.

“They were really cute,” she said.

The Durham planting day was made possible through a partnership between the NH Audubon, NRCS and UNH’s Cooperative Extension. Two additional planting dates will be held at the Bellamy River Wildlife Management Area in Dover on May 2 and May 9, with volunteers needed from 9 a.m. to noon or 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. To learn more visit newengland.stewardshipnetwork.org or email Haley Andreozzi at haley.andreozzi@unh.edu.

For more information on the New England cottontail and the effort to save the species visit www.newenglandcottontail.org.