

Cottontail Rabbit Status Report, 2018

Agriculture and Grassland Wildlife Program Note 18-1



2017-18 Hunter Harvest

Harvest estimates used in this report are based upon results from the 2017-18 Illinois Hunter Harvest Survey. An estimated 27,332 hunters (up 21.8%) harvested 132,167 rabbits (up 46%). Rabbit hunters averaged 0.90 rabbits per trip (down 15%) in the 2017-18 hunting season. This was the fifth-year that rabbit season ended February 15.

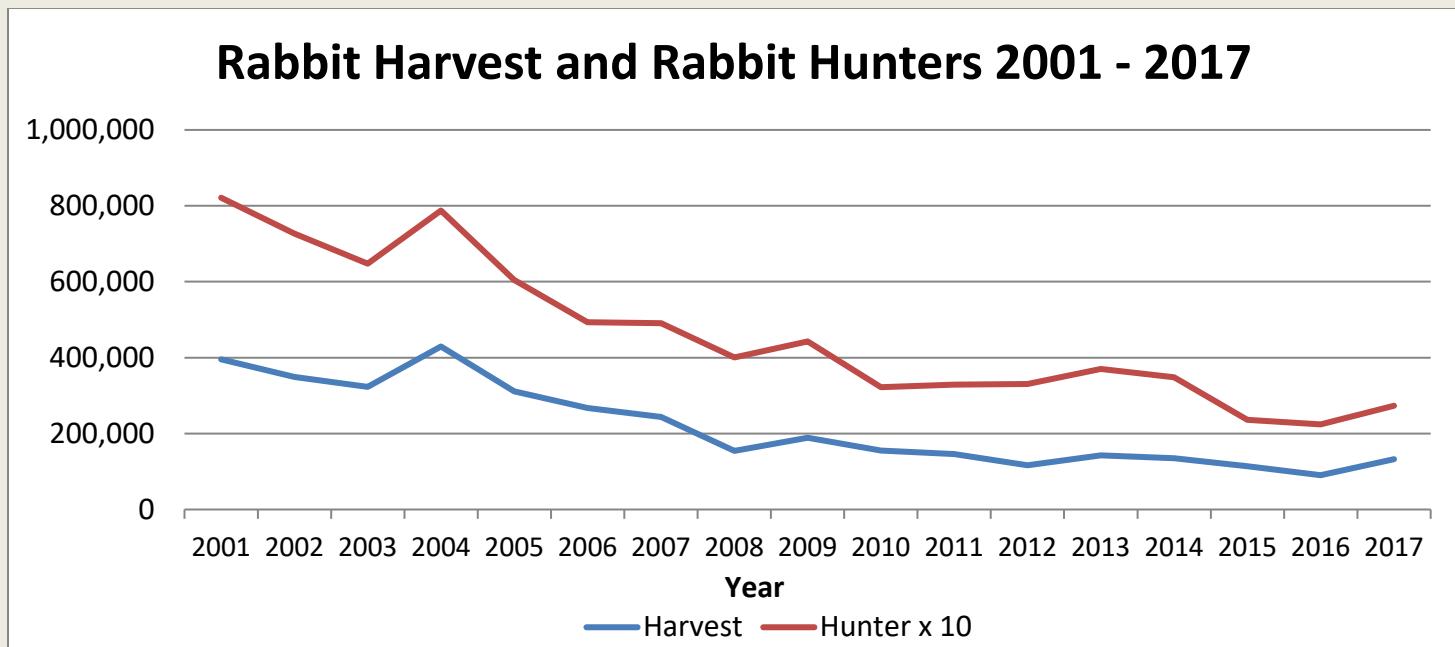


Figure 1. Rabbit Hunters and Rabbit Harvest, 2001 - 2017

Weather 2017-18

The winter of 2017-18 was relatively mild and winter mortality due to weather was likely low for rabbit. Spring brought above-average rainfall that may have been problematic for early rabbit litters in May. From June through most of August, weather conditions improved across much of the state. Overall, 2018 weather conditions were good for rabbits during their peak breeding season.

Rabbit Population Index

The road-kill index provides a measure of rabbit trends for Illinois that has been recorded since 1975. The road-kill index is calculated by tracking the number of road-killed rabbits counted in June and July per thousand miles traveled by observers. This year's road-kill index was < 1% higher than 2017 with 2.04 rabbits per 1000 miles traveled.

Cottontail Rabbit Road-kill Indices 1975-2018

(Rabbits counted per 1000 miles travelled)

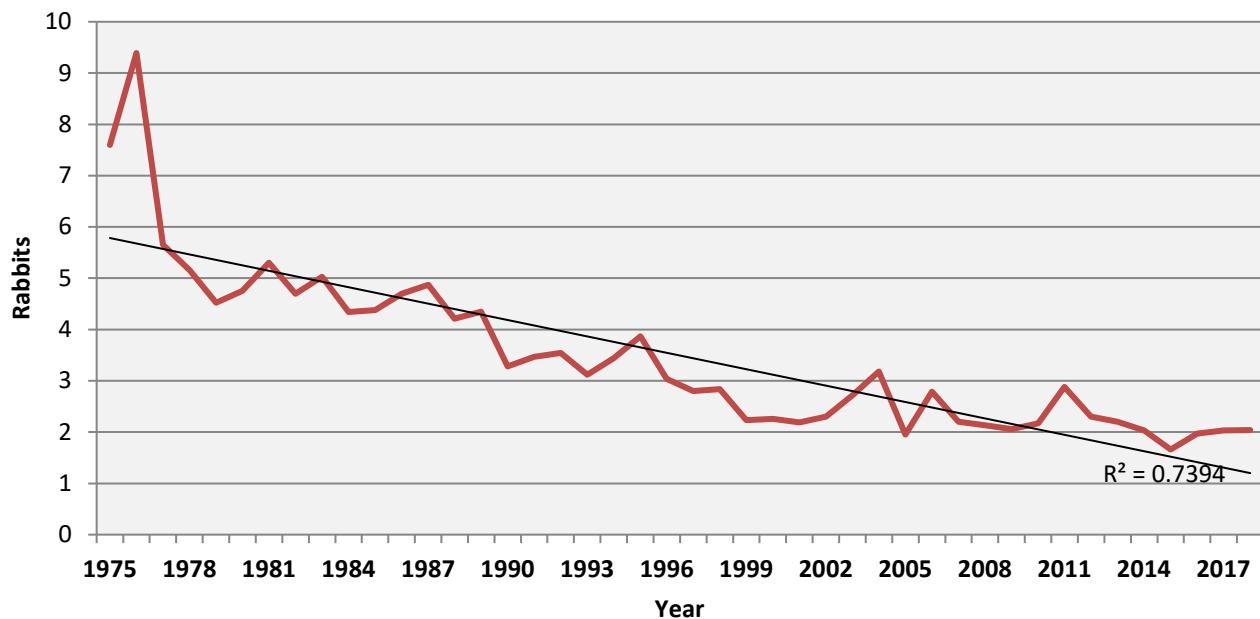


Figure 2. Cottontail Rabbit Road-kill Indices 1975 - 2018

2017-18 Season Outlook

Statewide trends show that rabbit numbers are roughly the same as last year's levels, so in areas with good habitat, hunters should find good numbers of rabbits. It is also noteworthy that despite a higher harvest the number of rabbits harvested per day was down. The timing of fall harvest for Illinois is close to normal with corn harvest 2% head of last year's pace and soybean harvest virtually mirroring last year. This should find most of the crops out of the fields by the time upland game season opens.

Best Areas

Look for farms with a mix of small fields with shrubby fencerows, old pasture, forest edges and areas of young or recently harvested timber. The most productive areas for rabbit hunting continue to be in west-central and southern Illinois. Based on the average annual harvest estimates from 1997 through 2017, some of the top counties are: Bond, Calhoun, Clay, Clinton, Madison, Marion and Wayne

Habitat Management Tips: Rabbit + Habitat = 'Rabbitat'

Brush piles are a staple for 'rabbitat'. Piles should be at least 10' in diameter and 3 – 5' high. Strategically placing them near blackberry brambles, shrub thickets, fence rows, etc. will maximize their benefits. Another tip is to build them over the top of small rock piles, old fenceposts or cinder blocks. Replace or add brush to them every 3 – 5 years.

- October and early November are good times to prepare for 'edge feathering.' This practice is simply dropping non-desirable trees along the edges of field borders to provide escape cover on field edges. Before cutting trees (and before a hard freeze), spray any brome or fescue in the landing zone with glyphosate to ensure open areas beneath the trees after they are dropped. Cut trees through March.
- Break up mowing times to ensure some suitable escape cover for rabbits throughout the year. Try not mow more than 1/3 or 1/4 of any fields, waterways or fallow areas at a time. Nesting season runs from March 1 – August 31. This selective mowing strategy is also important to pollinators like monarch butterflies, grassland birds and other wildlife that need cover and food throughout the growing season.

Thank you for your interest in the annual rabbit report. Have a safe and enjoyable hunting season in 2018!

Please take the time to introduce a kid to hunting!



Photo by Stan McTaggart

Season Dates

November 3, 2018 – February 15, 2019 (Statewide)

Hours

Sunrise to Sunset

Bag Limits

4 per day with 10 in possession after the 3rd day



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Photo by Adele Hodde

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