

Cottontail Rabbit Status Report, 2020

Agriculture and Grassland Wildlife Program Note 20-3



Photo by Adele Hodde

2019-20 Hunter Harvest

The number of rabbit hunters in 2018-19 (22,322) was down 18% from the previous year and they harvested 77,769 rabbits (down 41%). The number of rabbits per hunter/day also decreased 20%. Both the number of rabbit hunters and rabbit harvest are record lows since data has been recorded. This was the seventh-year that rabbit season ended February 15.

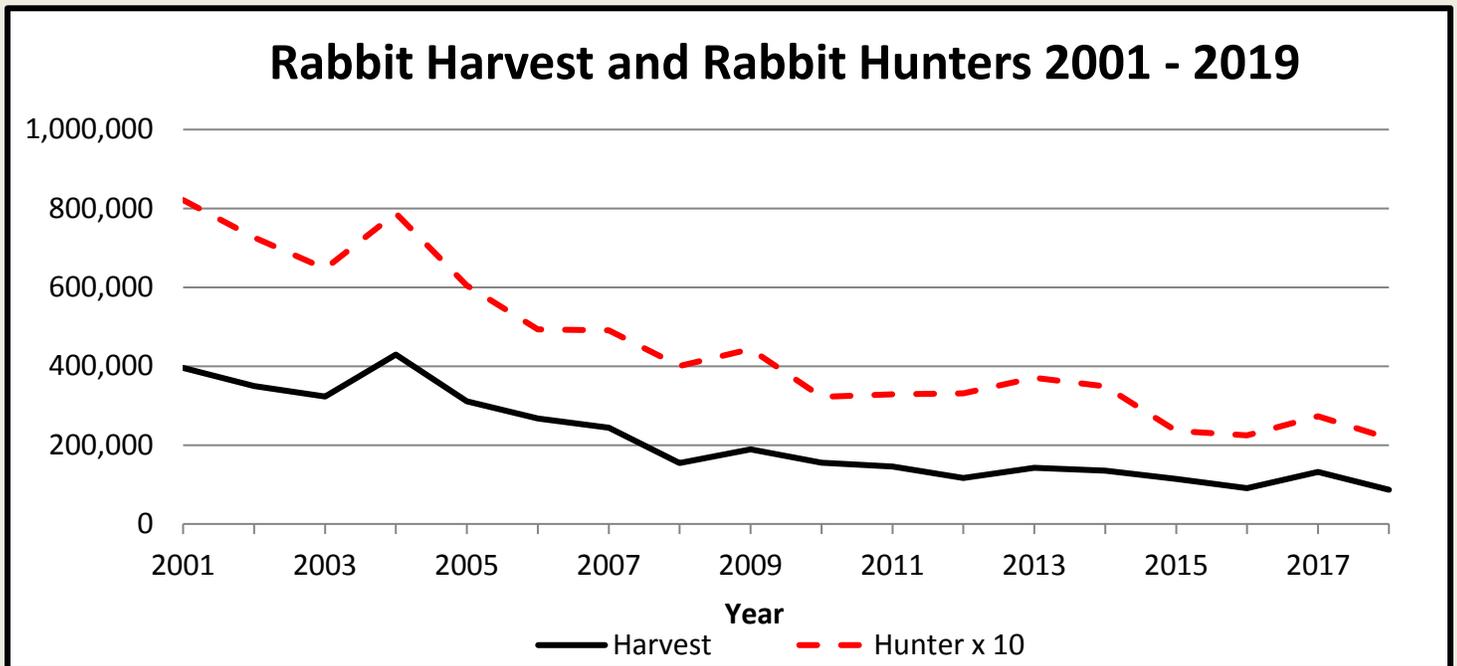


Figure 1. Rabbit Hunters and Rabbit Harvest, 2001 – 2019.

Weather 2019-20

The winter of 2019-2020 was relatively mild and winter mortality due to weather was likely low for rabbit. Spring brought above-average (N and Central Illinois) to normal (S IL) rainfall over a large portion of the State potentially impacting early rabbit litters in May and early June in parts of the state. From late June through most of July, weather conditions improved across much of the state. Overall, 2020 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 20% lower than 2019 with 1.83 rabbits per 1000 miles traveled.

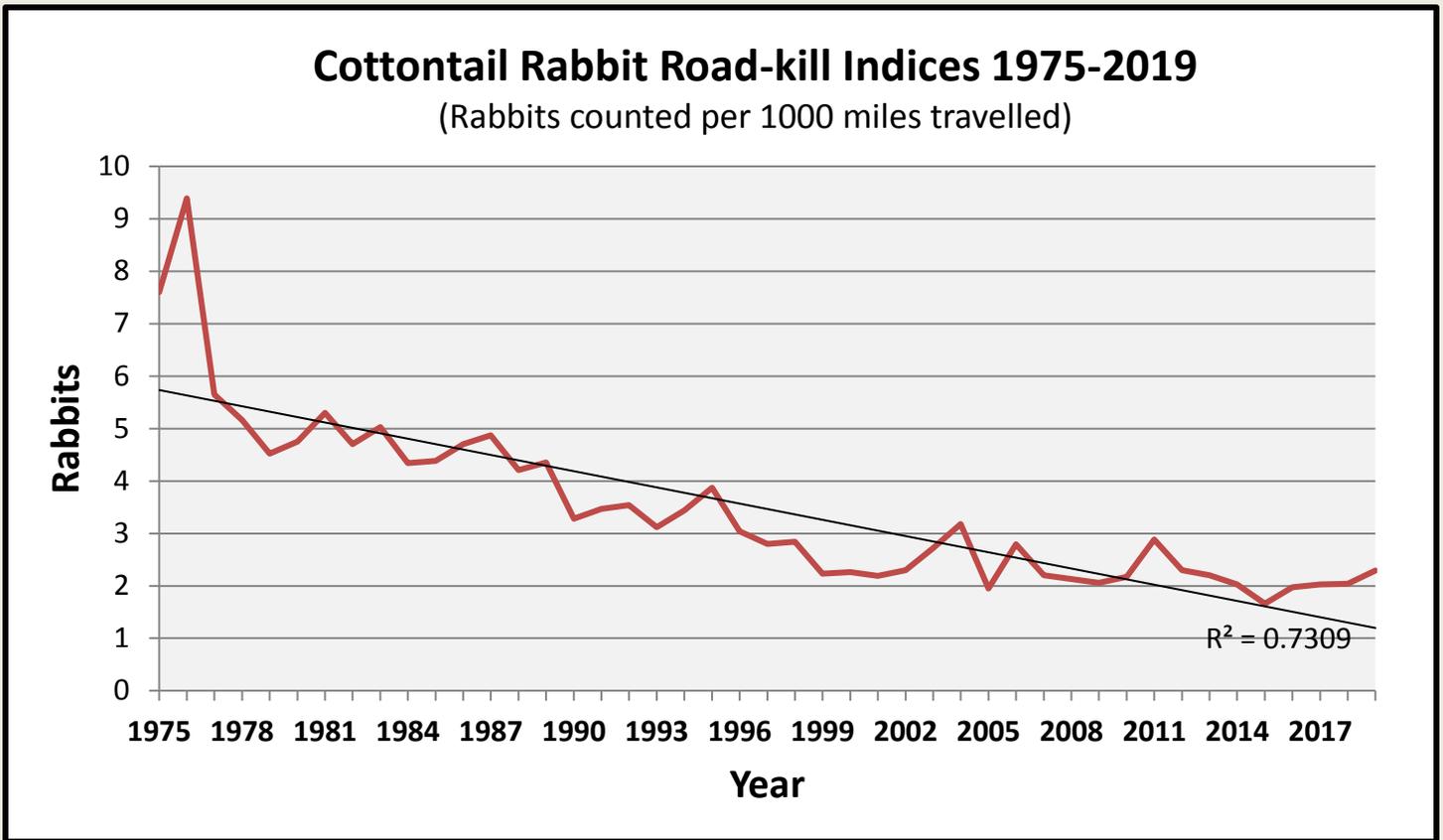


Figure 2. Cottontail Rabbit Road-kill Indices 1975 – 2019.

2019-2020 Season Outlook

Statewide trends show that rabbit numbers are down from last year’s levels, so concentrate in areas with good habitat. Hunters should find good numbers of rabbits in suitable habitat. Statewide, there is less suitable habitat available in Illinois than in years past. Localized areas of high-quality habitat can still be found across the state, but overall, there are fewer areas that support good populations of upland game; providing less opportunity for hunters. However, more litters were likely produced with the good weather later this summer which should lead to more success statewide.

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 2019, 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 field, 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 2020!



Please take the time to introduce a kid to hunting!



Photo by Jake Vancil

Season Dates (Update)

November 7, 2020 – February 15, 2021 (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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