

Cottontail Rabbit Status Report, 2025

Agriculture and Grassland Wildlife Program Note 25-3



2024-25 Hunter Harvest

At the time of this report, the 2024-25 Hunter Harvest Survey has not been finalized. Preliminary estimates indicate that 11,655 hunters harvested 53,770 rabbits in Illinois, compared to the 2023-24 totals of 15,650 hunters and 46,020 rabbits harvested. Although estimates indicate that fewer hunters pursued rabbits last season as compared to 2023-24, those that did saw increased success, with the average annual harvest per hunter reaching 4.6 rabbits. This was an increase of 1.7 rabbits per hunter, from the 2023-24 season estimate (2.9).

Rabbit Hunters and Harvest 2006-2024

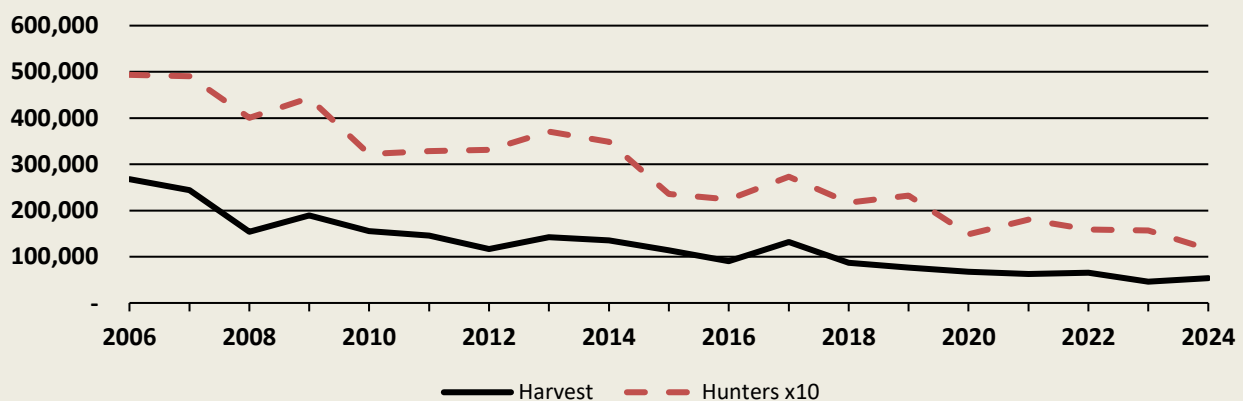


Figure 1. *Rabbit Hunters and Rabbit Harvest, 2006 – 2024.

Weather 2024-25

Outside of three weeks in January, the winter of 2024-25 throughout Illinois was mild. However, during the weeks mentioned previously, the temperatures remained well below normal, with few seeing temperatures above the freezing point throughout that stretch. Also, winter precipitation was in play, with the northern two-thirds of the state covered in several inches of snow and the southern third of Illinois experiencing heavy ice accumulations. Spring brought adequate rainfall over most of the State with portions of the state experiencing heavy precipitation events at times. Southern Illinois was particularly wet throughout the spring and into the early summer. The state began to heat up and dry out through July and August, with drought conditions occurring throughout the state in September into early October. Despite the droughty conditions late in the growing season, conditions were adequate throughout much of the primary reproductive 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 statewide road-kill index was 1.81 rabbits. This is a 13% increase from the all-time index low that was set in 2024. Worth noting, Southern Illinois came in at 1.6 rabbits/1,000 miles, while Northern Illinois was at 2.0 rabbits/1,000 miles. In 2024, both Northern and Southern Illinois were nearly identical, at 1.56 and 1.57, respectively. This season's discrepancy provides evidence that the unseasonably cold temperatures and ice in Southern Illinois in January, may have had a greater impact on winter survival than previously thought, although there are other possible variables that could be at play, including overall habitat conditions and also the extremely wet weather experienced in Southern Illinois from April through June.

Cottontail Rabbit Road-kill Indices 1975-2025

(Rabbits counted per 1000 miles travelled)

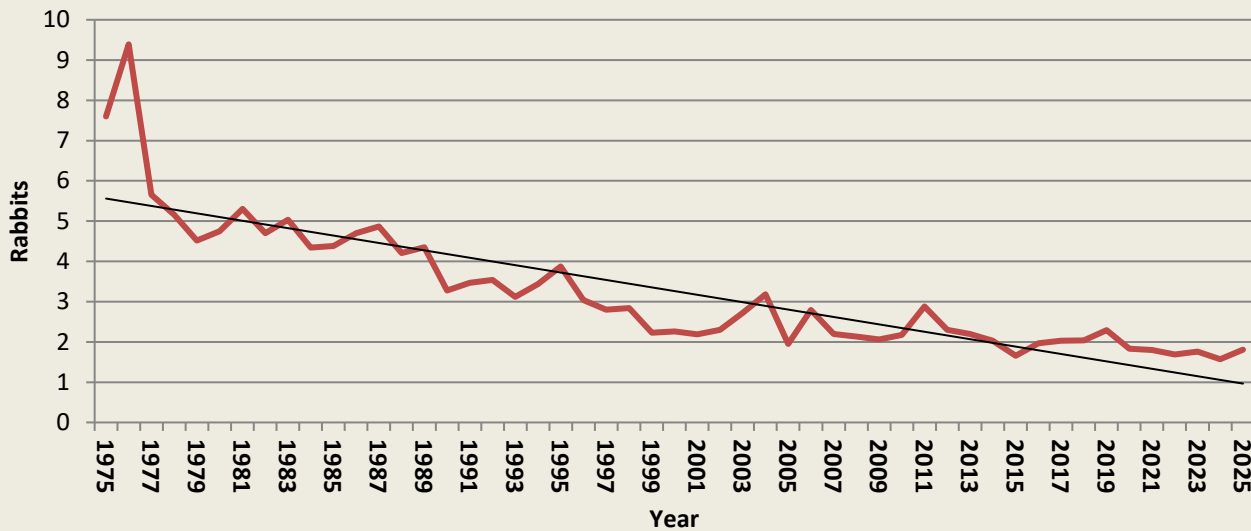


Figure 2. Cottontail Rabbit Road-kill Indices 1975 – 2025.

2025-2026 Season Outlook

Statewide trends show that rabbit numbers continue their decline, although there is evidence that numbers will be slightly up this year in relation to the past few years. Success will require that you concentrate in areas with good habitat. Hunters should find fair to good numbers of rabbits in suitable habitat. 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 could 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 will likely be in West-central Illinois. For our hunters' sake, here's to hoping that doe cottontails in Southern Illinois were able to out-reproduce the poor weather experienced throughout the first half of 2025 within the region.

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. Creating brush piles that are too large and dense will have negative impacts for local upland species, as these provide potential denning sites for mammalian predators.
- 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, 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 cover for rabbits throughout the year. Try not to 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, so do your best to avoid mowing during this period. 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. Also, avoid the temptation of mowing lanes for hunting purposes. Sure, doing so makes it easier on the hunter, but it also attracts and benefits predators who naturally select such features for their hunts.

- Healthy, native grasslands benefit rabbits among other grassland birds and wildlife. Consider converting stands of fescue or brome to native warm-season grasses and forbs. Also, look to the USDA for conservation programs like CRP, to remove unproductive crop acres to permanent, native grassland cover. Habitat work today, leads to the hunts of tomorrow.

Thank you for your interest in the annual rabbit report. Have a safe and enjoyable hunting season in 2025!

Rabbit hunting is one of the best ways to introduce new hunters to the sport. Please take the time to bring along and mentor new hunters!



Photo by Jake Vancil

Season Dates Update

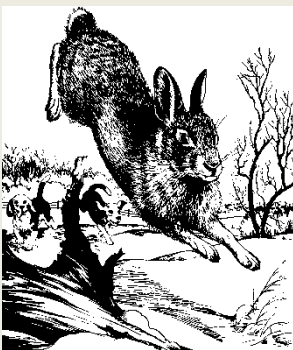
November 1, 2025 – February 15, 2026 (Statewide)

Hours

Sunrise to Sunset

Bag Limit

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



*Prepared by Don Kahl 10/3/25
Illinois Department of Natural Resources
Division of Wildlife Resources*



Photo by Adele Hodde

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