

Young Forest Initiative

An update of activities benefitting young forest wildlife

NEC Regional Monitoring Results, 2016-2017

New England cottontails can be distinguished from non-native eastern cottontails by examining their skulls, slight differences in markings, or by DNA. We receive skulls from obliging hunters or collected roadkill specimens. Field identification is possible only if the rabbit is closely examined in hand—identification from a distance would likely be impossible. The most widespread and non-invasive identification method is to collect rabbit fecal pellets for DNA testing.

Throughout most of New England and eastern New York, biologists, field technicians, volunteers, and private landowners have taken part in a regional monitoring program to locate populations of New England cottontails.

The current protocol is to visit a roughly ten-acre plot in the winter, preferably 48 hours or more after snow has fallen. Cold winter temperatures keep the fecal pellets fresh, and snow makes them easier to see. Technicians or volunteers walk five transects through the plot, collect pellets in vials and record the coordinates where each sample is taken. They also record information about the habitat itself—the percent of the ground covered in shrubs and percent of tree canopy present.

In Connecticut, a dedicated team of six field technicians participated in regional monitoring for the winter 2016-2017 field season. Sometimes joined by college interns or vol-

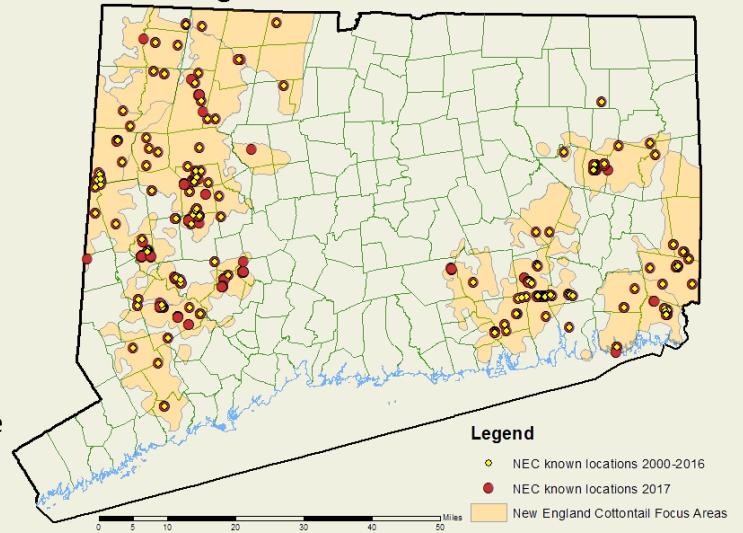
unteers, they braved the cold and the densely tangled, thorny thickets to collect pellets. Of the roughly 3,100 pellet samples sent from the entire region, about half of them came from Connecticut.

The Good News

We are happy to announce the DNA results from the Connecticut DEEP's regional monitoring project are in, and we have 350 confirmed New England cottontail samples in over 35 locations, including three new towns: Haddam, Harwinton, and New Fairfield. Regional monitoring will begin again for the 2017-2018 field season, with field technicians, volunteers, and private landowners surveying sites for rabbit fecal pellets.



New England Cottontail Known Locations



If your property is in a New England cottontail focus area and contains a significant area of dense shrubs, you may have a resident population of NECs. If you're interested in finding out, email Travis (travis.goodie@ct.gov). You will be provided with data sheets and instructions.

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The Young Forest Team Welcomes RCPP Forester Josh Miller



Josh Miller, RCPP forester

We are pleased to welcome Josh Miller to the Young Forest team. Josh grew up on his family's farm in Durham, Connecticut, and attended Paul Smith's College, majoring in forestry with a concentration in ecological forest management. He has since worked a season as a forestry technician for the DEEP and spent three years as a procurement forester for a local sawmill.

Live Trapping for NECs

The New England Cottontail Project field technicians are hard at work trapping for the captive breeding programs at the Roger Williams and Queens Zoos. In order to prevent inbreeding, the zoos bring in new rabbits every year, and "founders", or rabbits that have contributed to the captive population, are released near where they were captured.

Field techs set traps in dense thickets where there are known NEC populations. To avoid depleting individual populations, they trap at several locations instead of removing many NECs from one site.

Trapped rabbits are identified in the field, and field techs take a tissue sample for DNA testing to backup their IDs. The rabbits are weighed and measured. Eastern cottontails and any NECs that are not needed by the zoos are ear-tagged and released.



A cottontail being released, photo by Molly Tassmer

New Projects on State Lands

As the fall progresses, we are beginning habitat management on several wildlife management areas within our NEC Focus Areas. A 27.7-acre plot at Assekong Swamp WMA and a 33.3-acre plot at Pease Brook WMA are already underway. Wildlife biologists and foresters have also completed plans for habitat management on Aldo Leopold and Mad River WMAs, which will be carried out this fall and winter. Both Mad River and Aldo Leopold WMAs have known New England cottontail populations. Those areas were left buffered to protect the NECs already living there while giving them more habitat to disperse to as their populations grow.



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Our Conservation Partners

The Young Forest Initiative in Connecticut is a partnership of the DEEP, federal agencies and private organizations.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is part of the United States Department of Agriculture. The NRCS provides funding and technical assistance for conservation projects on private lands. They assist farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners to improve the environment and agricultural operations. The NRCS has helped fund over 50 New England cottontail habitat projects on private lands in Connecticut through a special program called Working Lands for Wildlife. The new Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) grant is helping fund plans and practices that benefit American woodcock, NEC, and a suite of other shrubland species. This year the NRCS has awarded four RCPP contracts, creating about 50 acres of habitat.

The Wildlife Management Institute (WMI) was created in 1911 by sportsmen who were concerned by dwindling wildlife populations. It is a nonprofit scientific and educational organization. They have taken a leadership role in coordinating regional partners since the formal inception of the Young Forest Initiative, in 2008. Scot Williamson, WMI Vice-President says "the goal of the initiative is to have 10% of managed forestland throughout the region be young forest. In about 15 years each patch of young forest will be past its usefulness to targeted species, so we always need to be planning about where we should be creating the next suitable patch".

Contact Information

For more information, or to discuss a potential project, please contact the following:

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Our office location is:

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The following websites offer further information pertaining to young forest species:

www.ct.gov/deep/youngforestinitiative
www.newenglandcottontail.org
www.timberdoodle.org
www.youngforest.org
www.ctnrns.usda.gov/cottontail
www.fws.gov/northeast/indepth/rabbit

What do you think?

We hope you find this newsletter informative and we welcome all comments. To submit recommendations or to unsubscribe, please email: andrea.petrullo@ct.gov

