

SPECIES SPOTLIGHT

Look for it now in Southwest Ohio!

4/4/2021



"Cottontail Nest Marked with Yarn" by Nature Nurses Wildlife Rescue



"Eastern Cottontail" by Ohio Certified Volunteer Naturalist Dave Woehr

Eastern Cottontail *(Sylvilagus floridanus)*

By Shannon Pennington, Staff Naturalist

The most common rabbit species in North America, the [eastern cottontail](#) is a frequent visitor to many rural and suburban yards. With their silent nature and fast, hopping gait, they often come and go without detection, leaving behind evidence of their visits by a plant that has been chewed to the ground or a pile of droppings. When you do see one in your yard, this prey species is often in "fight, flight, or freeze" mode, reacting to a perceived threat.

Cottontails like open meadows, clearings, and fallow fields, with nearby shrubs or brush piles for an easy retreat from hawks, owls, foxes, coyotes, raccoons, and domestic cats and dogs. Their huge eyes and large ears help them detect potential predators, and their mottled gray-brown fur provides good camouflage. A cottontail's diet is almost exclusively herbaceous, with grasses, clovers, dandelions, and chickweed being preferred foods.

I get calls every year from community members who have found cottontail nests in their yard, often discovered by a perceptive pet or child. As long as the bunnies are not injured and have not been in a pet's mouth, the best course of action is often to cover the nest back up, mark it with some yarn, keep your pets away from it, and check back in about 12 hours. If the yarn has been displaced, mom has returned to feed them. If not, give a [permitted wildlife rehabilitator](#) a call for advice.

To learn more about this species, visit www.NatureNurses.org/Bunny

FUN FACTS

- Cottontails are prolific breeders, with one female having between 6-8 litters a year consisting of 2-9 babies per litter
- Their nests are often made right in the middle of an open area
- Babies are called kits, and are born blind and deaf
- Moms only return to feed their babies twice a day, usually at dawn and dusk, so it's not unusual to find a nest of kits with no mom around
- Though they're born helpless, they grow up quickly and are on their own at just four weeks old
- They can start their own families at just three months old