



# Wildlife Rehabilitators' Association of Massachusetts

## Why Wildlife Matters: Rabbit Realms – Exploring the World of the Eastern Cottontail

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### Winter 2025 Newsletter

By Stephanie Ellis, Executive Director, Wild Care, Inc.

**The Eastern Cottontail is an abundant species in MA.** They are not a native species, but certainly a beloved one - unless you are a gardener that is!

**Our native rabbit is the New England Cottontail.** Per correspondence with MassWildlife Biologist Dave Scarpitti, Cape Cod hosts the highest concentrations of both species, due to the prevalence of dense vegetation, mild winters, and fewer predators compared with more urban locations. Rabbit heaven!

**Eastern cottontails were imported from the lower Midwest** and introduced to Nantucket and across MA for hunting beginning in 1895. In the 1920's-30th, the Division of Fisheries and Game developed a captive propagation and stocking program. Well, the cottontails bred like rabbits, and the rest is history. Eastern Cottontails are found in nearly every habitat and backyard in MA, even on the sidewalks of Boston.

**The Eastern Cottontail is solitary.** They are typically silent but communicate softly and "thump". They scream when seized. They are most active at dawn and dusk and are considered nocturnal or "crepuscular". Because they are a prey item for numerous species of hawks, owls and predatory mammals, life expectancy is less than one month. Though they can live beyond 2 years in the wild.

**Active year-round, they typically nest on less than 1.5 acres of land** and utilize natural and man-made dwellings to escape from predators. Their nests consist of a shallow depression or scrape in grass, and may contain leaves, droppings, and occasionally bits of paper. There is usually fur in the nest from mom's breast, which is used to conceal and keep the young warm when mom is not present.

**Cottontails may reuse a nest in one season,** but young do not return to the nest once they leave. Mom nurses the young twice per day at dusk and dawn, she otherwise is not present at the nest as she would be an attractant for predators. Cottontails commonly nest in backyards with dogs. It is suspected that the dog wards off larger predators, deeming the location "safe" to nest. However, more often than not, the dog becomes the nest predator. More on this below.

**Newborn cottontails, referred to as "hippos" or "kittens"** are approximately 2 inches long and weigh less than one ounce. They are born naked, blind, deaf and helpless. They remain scentless in the nest unless handled by a human or predator. They mature rapidly, leaving the nest in 2 weeks, and are fully independent by 3-4 weeks old. A bright-eyed and bushy-tailed rabbit that is 3-4 inches in length is an independent juvenile, capable of survival on its own. They reach adult size after 4 months of age. Males mature at one month of age, females within 2-3 months.

**Orphaned cottontails are one of the most frequent mammals received into wildlife rehabilitation care in Massachusetts** during the spring and summer months. Their primary impacts are dog and cat interactions with nests, habitat disruption due to landscaping, and machinery such as weed whackers and lawn mowers, and also human possession. Since mother rabbits typically nurse twice per day, their absence at the nest to an untrained eye is often mistaken as an "abandoned" nest.

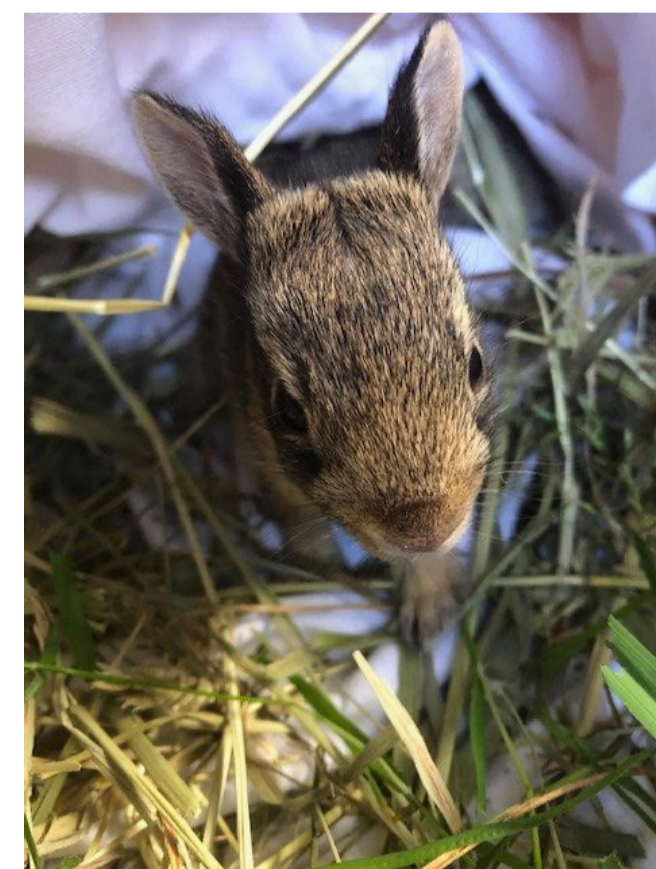
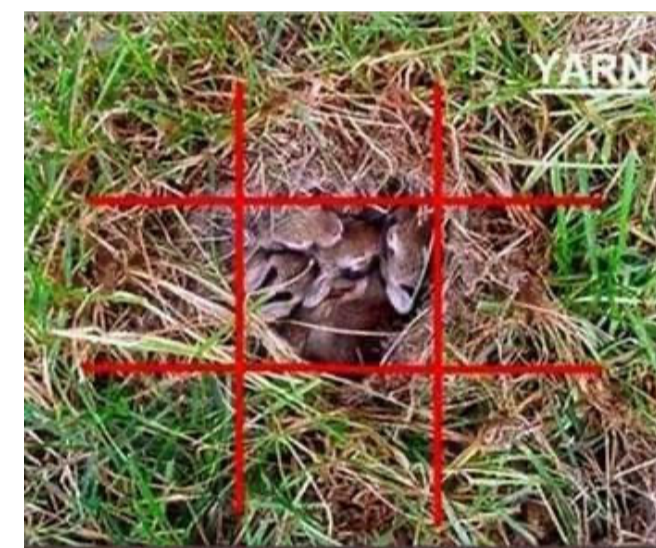
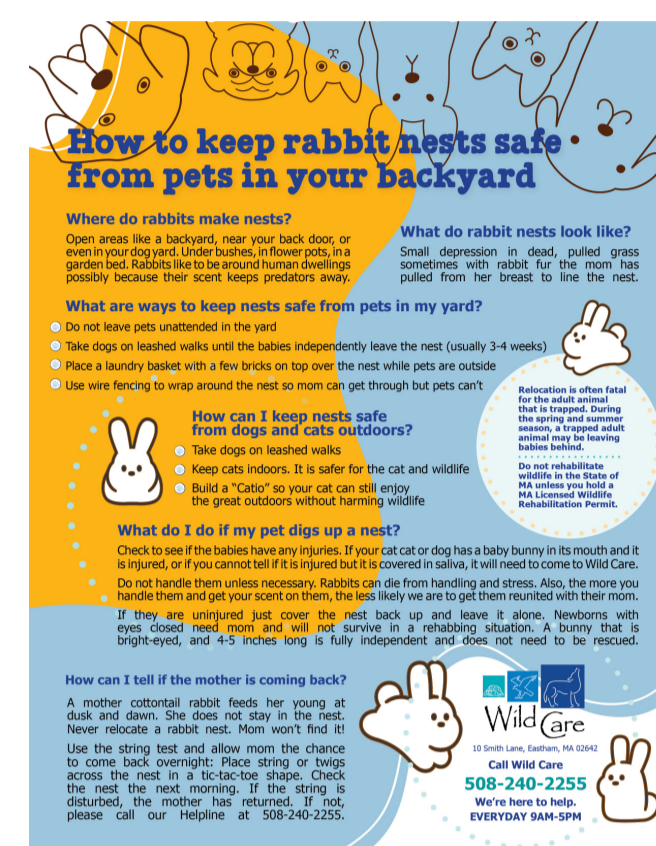
**How do you determine if a rabbit nest is truly abandoned?** See WRAM's resource page and tips in the Member's area: <https://wraminc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Rabbits-ACO-Pamphlet.pdf>

What do you do if there is a rabbit nest in your yard, and you have a dog? See [attached document from Wild Care, Inc.](#) on keeping your rabbit nest safe from pets.

**How can you help rabbits stay safe in your backyard?**

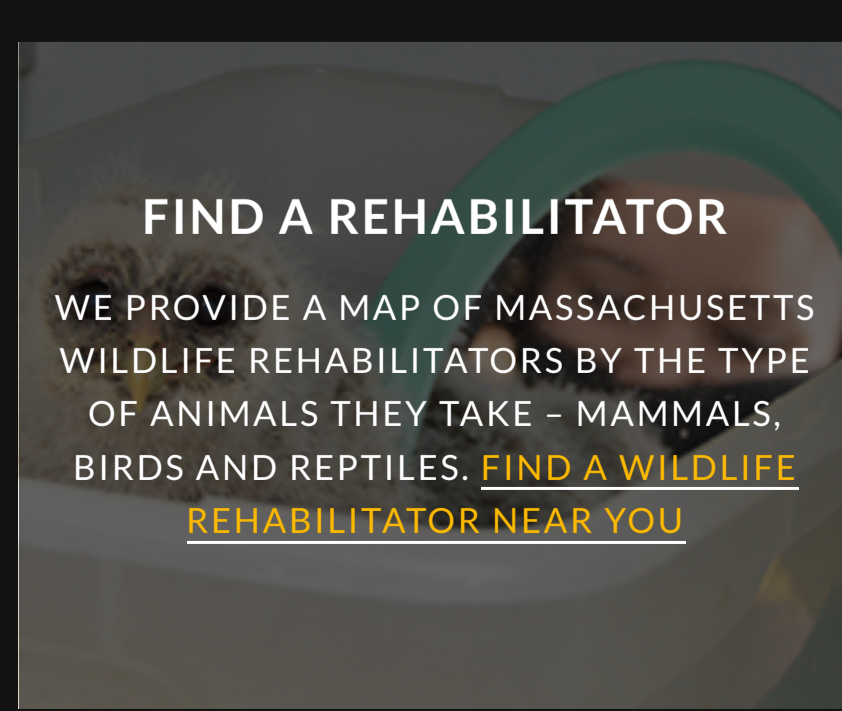
- Keep children and pets away from nests.
- Only handle baby rabbits when absolutely necessary (ie- when determining if they are injured or orphaned).
- Take dogs on leash walks, especially in rabbit areas.
- Keep cats indoors. Safer for the cat, and for the rabbits.
- Check lawns and fields for nests before you mow.
- Check brush piles & fire pits for rabbit nests or babies before burning.
- Don't use lawn pesticides.

**Eastern Cottontails are adaptable and abundant.** They are an important source of food for many predatory species. Studies have shown that when cottontail populations are reduced, some predator populations also decline. Being herbivores, cottontails play important roles in controlling plant populations with their constant grazing. They are also quite beautiful and peaceful to observe, and have become a backyard icon. A symbol of curiosity and adventure!



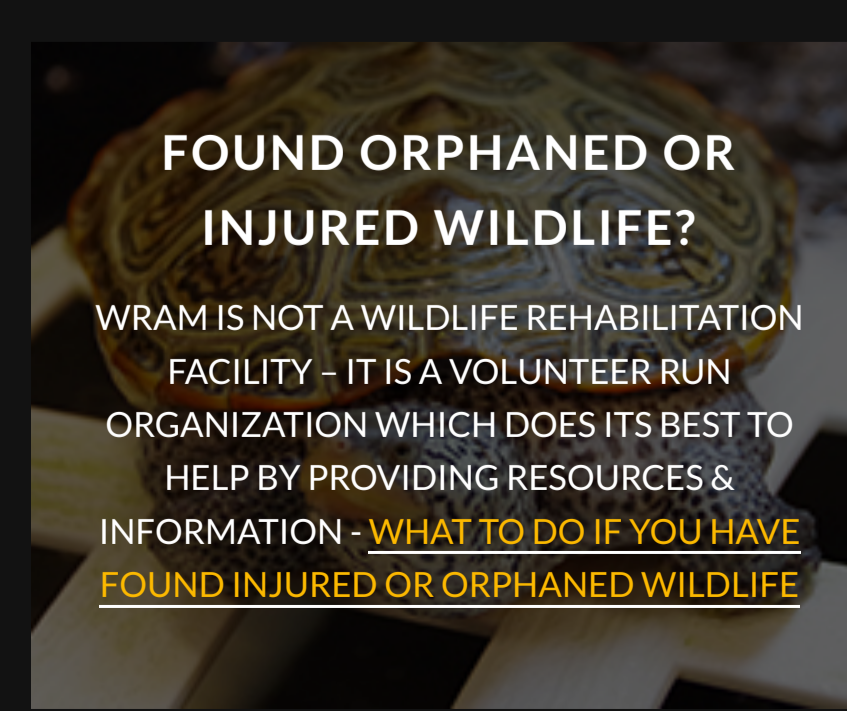
#### JOIN WRAM

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#### FIND A REHABILITATOR

WE PROVIDE A MAP OF MASSACHUSETTS WILDLIFE REHABILITATORS BY THE TYPE OF ANIMALS THEY TAKE - MAMMALS, BIRDS AND REPTILES. [FIND A WILDLIFE REHABILITATOR NEAR YOU](#)



#### FOUND ORPHANED OR INJURED WILDLIFE?

WRAM IS NOT A WILDLIFE REHABILITATION FACILITY - IT IS A VOLUNTEER RUN ORGANIZATION WHICH DOES ITS BEST TO HELP BY PROVIDING RESOURCES & INFORMATION - [WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE FOUND INJURED OR ORPHANED WILDLIFE](#)