

Cottontail Rabbit Status Report, 2019

Agriculture and Grassland Wildlife Program Note 19-1



Photo by Adele Hodde

2018-19 Hunter Harvest

Harvest estimates used in this report are based upon results from the 2018-19 Illinois Hunter Harvest Survey. An estimated 21,714 hunters (down 25%) harvested 86,671 rabbits (down 52%). Rabbit hunters averaged 0.79 rabbits per trip (down 14%) in the 2018-19 hunting season. This was the sixth-year that rabbit season ended February 15.

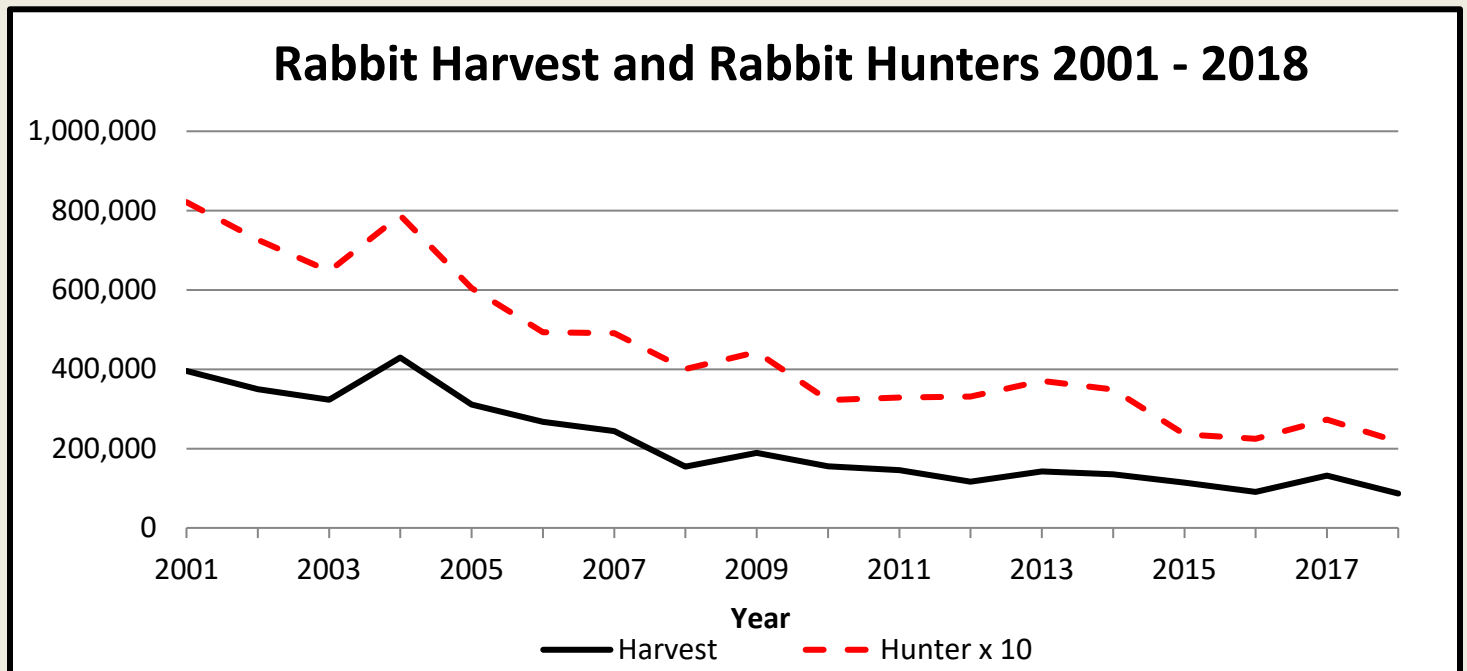


Figure 1. Rabbit Hunters and Rabbit Harvest, 2001 – 2018.

Weather 2018-19

Besides the short burst of cold caused by the Arctic polar vortex in late January and early February, the winter of 2018-2019 was relatively mild and winter mortality due to weather was likely low for rabbits. Spring brought above-average rainfall that may have been problematic for early rabbit litters in May. From June through most of August, weather conditions improved across much of the state. Overall, 2019 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 11% higher than 2018 with 2.29 rabbits per 1000 miles traveled.

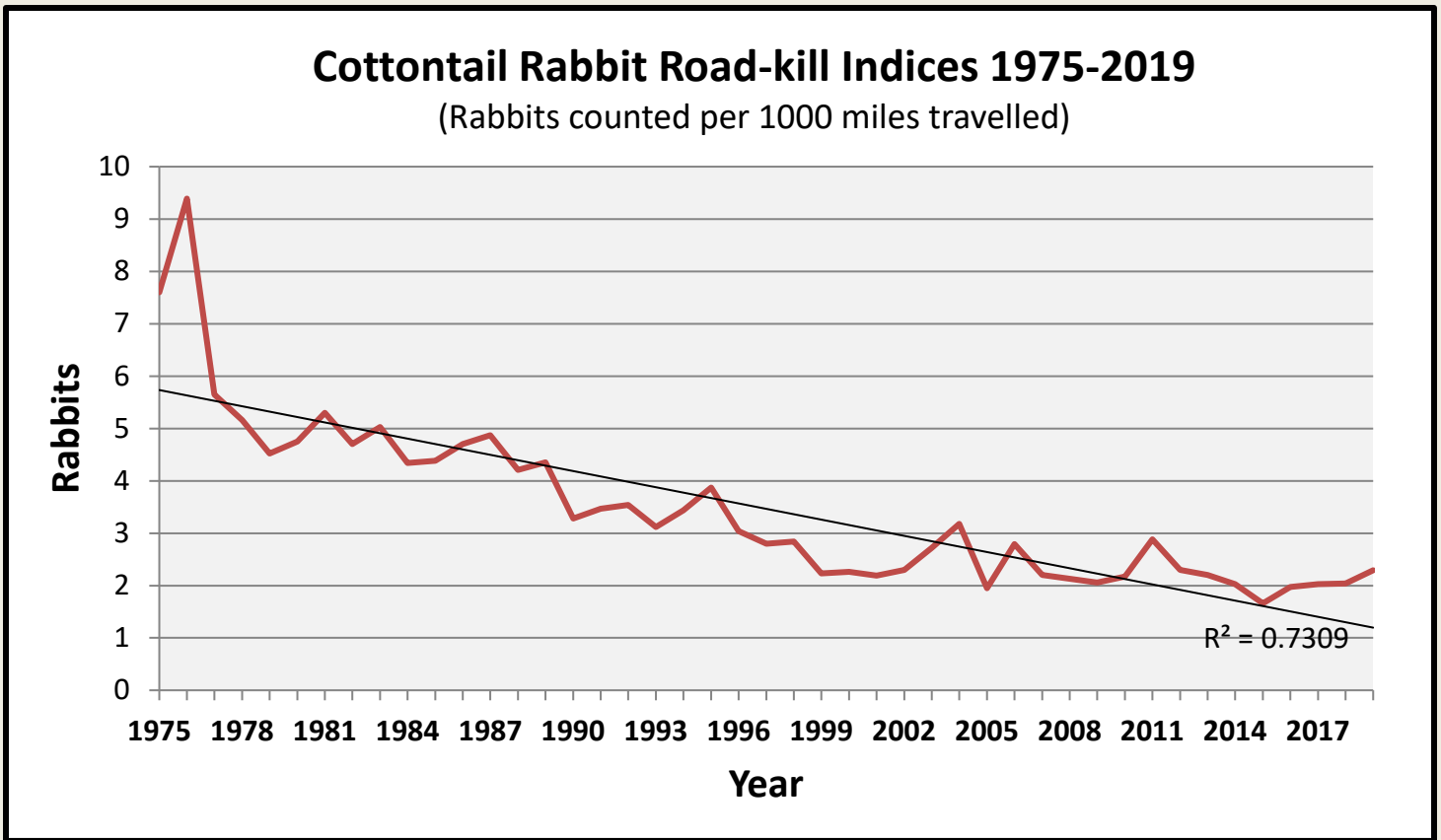


Figure 2. Cottontail Rabbit Road-kill Indices 1975 – 2019.

2019-2020 Season Outlook

Statewide trends show that rabbit numbers are roughly the same as last year’s levels, so in areas with good habitat, hunters should find good numbers of rabbits. Fall harvest will be delayed in many of the areas across the state due to a wet spring. Many crops may still be standing during the season opener possibly impacting the amount of upland game seen during the early part of the season.

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 2017, 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 2019!

Please take the time to introduce a kid to hunting!



Season Dates (Update)

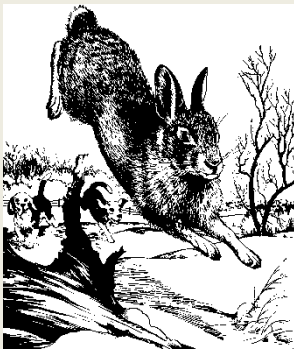
November 2, 2018 – February 15, 2019 (Statewide)

Hours

Sunrise to Sunset

Bag Limits

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



*Prepared by Wade Louis 09/19
Illinois Department of Natural Resources
Division of Wildlife Resources*



Photo by Adele Hodde

Equal opportunity to participate in programs of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) and those funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other agencies is available to all individuals regardless of race, sex, national origin, disability, age, religion or other non-merit factors. If you believe you have been discriminated against, contact the funding source's civil rights office and/or the Equal Employment Opportunity Officer, IDNR, One Natural Resources Way, Springfield, IL 62702-1271; 217/785-0067; TTY 217/782-9175.