



A Marsh Rabbit, ever close to its briars and wet bottomlands home, keeps a close watch on the approaching four-eyed, fuzzy-lipped John

Brunswick Wildlife Lower Cape Fear's Rabbits: Feel the Need for Speed!

Brunswick County has two of the three native species of rabbits found in North Carolina, a cottontail and a water rabbit, the Eastern Cottontail and the Marsh Rabbit respectively. The Eastern Cottontail is found throughout the state while the third NC native, the Appalachian Cottontail, is found only in higher elevations of the mountains.

The Marsh Rabbit lives in very wet places in the Coastal Plains and eastern portion of the Piedmont. They are more numerous near the coast in large swamps; freshwater and saltwater marshes; and on coastal islands.

The easiest ways to distinguish Marsh Rabbits from cottontails are by habitat and a dark undertail versus white. Additional helpful keys are defense adaptations, foot color, and overall coloration and features.

Cottontails are brown with faintly speckled black and tan highlights, have white undersides, and their tail is brown above and white underneath.

Marsh Rabbits have a darker brown coat and coarse hair. They are called other names such as "bluetail" and "swamp rabbit". The latter is a misnomer because there is a separate Swamp Rabbit species that resides west of NC.

Both species are approximately the same length; however, the Marsh Rabbit is noticeably heavier and has smaller ears and tail. Neither are rodents they are lagomorphs. Someday I'll have to look that up and tell you what it means. Someday...

Both rabbits are prey species, very important as herbivores that convert plants into protein in the food chain as they in turn are eaten by carnivores and omnivores. The life expectancy of the majority of both species is less than a year with the oldest living to about four years.

To compensate for low life expectancy, evolution has ensured they have high breeding success. Generally both breed from February through September or maybe a little longer in our area. Marsh Rabbits yearly have three to four litters consisting of up to five young each.

Cottontails are more prolific producing up to five litters a year with an average of five young. Females (called “does”, the males “bucks”) may begin breeding about three months old and may have up to two litters before their first winter.

Given both are prey species; they are not without defensive strategies. Their eyes, mostly on the sides of their head, provide wide-angle monocular vision. Other defenses include: camouflaged colors, nocturnal foraging, occupying dense cover during daytime, and freezing first followed by speedy flight as needed for predator avoidance.

Marsh Rabbits are stealthy and nocturnal feeders that live in bottomlands and swamps with permanent water supplies from lakes, streams, canals, and marshes...habitats that are mostly inaccessible.

Marsh Rabbits may hide from predators by floating with just their eyes and nose above water. They have shorter legs than most rabbit species so on land they usually walk instead of hopping; however, they swim remarkably well.

On a recent trip I glimpsed an animal in the Daw’s Creek bottomlands and first thought “squirrel”. As I raised my camera my brain said: “no, too large”. I accidentally startled a marsh rabbit and watched as it “walk across the water” to get away from me the transfixed guy with the frozen shutter finger. Yes, it actually swims that fast!

Cottontails run almost as fast as Marsh Rabbits; however, they unlike their cousins run a zigzag pattern, an adaptation that confuses pursuing predators.

Cottontails feed usually at dawn or dusk on plants from three plant families: grasses, legumes, and composites from the aster/sunflower family...even cultivated plants.

Marsh Rabbits eat rhizomes; the stems and bulbs of a variety of plants; cane; and on succulent roots. They generally cause no harm to crops or landscaping plants. Both species may resort to twigs and bark in winter.

Where to go to watch this action? For cottontails, you probably like me have to go no further than your yard. For Marsh Rabbits, two places come to mind: the grassy areas behind the Lake Waccamaw State Park visitor center and the edges of the small wetlands behind the Oak Island Recreational Center. Leave your tortoise at home (it has no chance) and enjoy the speed!

John Ennis



It has been shown that yard rabbits appreciate neglected landscaping far more than home owner's associations



My yard rabbit occasionally litters up the backyard

