

The New England cottontail (*Sylvilagus transitionalis*) is the only native cottontail species in Rhode Island and has been declining so rapidly that it is now a candidate species for listing under the Endangered Species Act. In 2005, two New England cottontails (NEC) were trapped on a portion of Ninigret National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). To gain a better understanding of the distribution and abundance of this species at Ninigret we began collecting fecal pellets for DNA testing during the winter of 2008-2009. Refuge staff and volunteers collected 47 fecal pellet samples with all of them being identified as Eastern cottontail by the University of New Hampshire.

In 2009-2011 we intensified our survey efforts by trapping in suitable habitat at both Ninigret and Sachuest Point Refuges for a total of 3077 trap nights. To date, we have captured 53 cottontails from which refuge staff took tissue samples and applied ear tags. We have also collected 35 fecal pellets thus far and continue to collect samples at Ninigret, Trustom Pond and Sachuest. Samples are being sent to the University of Rhode Island for DNA testing and we are anxiously awaiting the results.

In addition, the Refuge is also working with the Town of Charlestown and the Partners program to manage a portion of town property abutting Ninigret NWR for NEC. Large trees will be removed to encourage shrub growth and brush piles will be created to offer shelter for the cottontails. The Refuge is working closely with the Coastal Program and other neighboring partners to search and survey for the elusive rabbit on private and public land throughout coastal Rhode Island in the hope that we will discover more occupied sites.



Refuge staff placing ear tag on Eastern cottontail.
(Photo taken by DorieStolley at Ninigret NWR,
January 2, 2011)



Kevin Rogers, biological intern, checks traps for
cottontails at Ninigret NWR. (Photo taken by Dorie
Stolley on November 23, 2010)