

Young Forest Initiative

An update of activities benefitting young forest wildlife

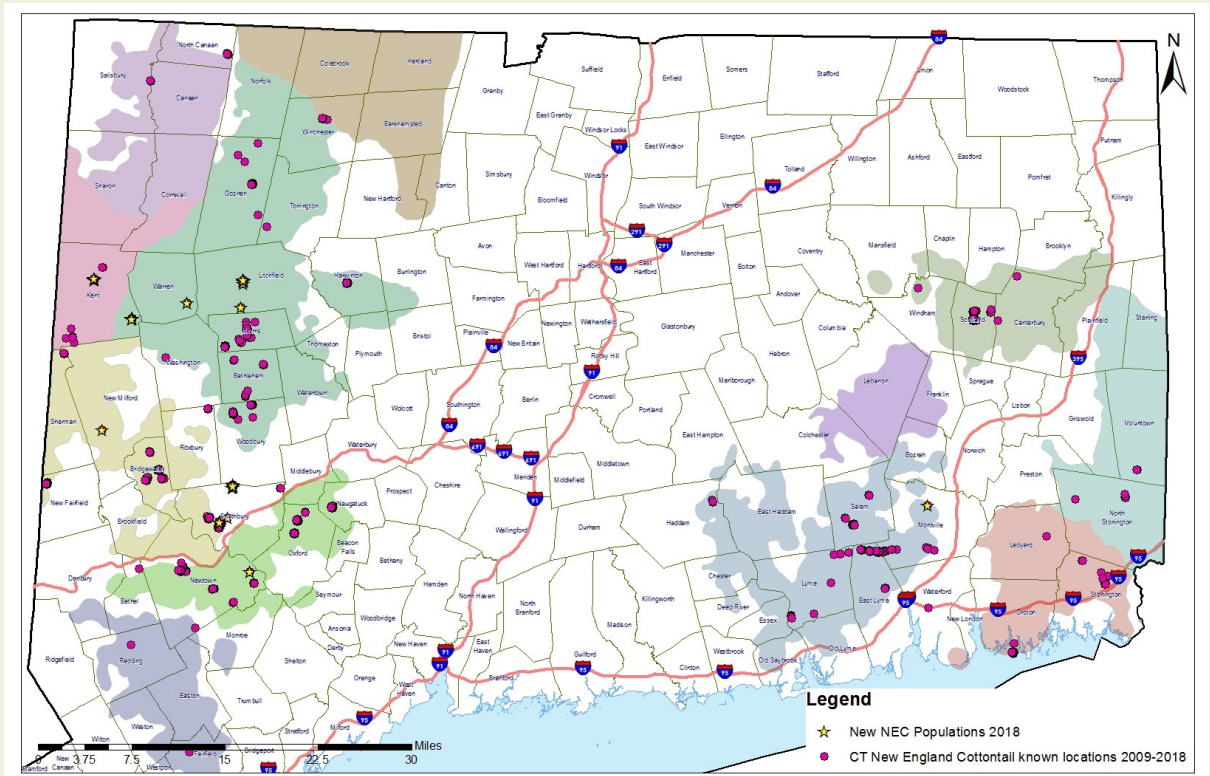
Regional Monitoring Results, 2017-2018

As the days grew shorter and the temperatures dropped, field technicians and volunteers donned their sturdiest clothes to brave the thorny, tangled thickets that cottontails call home. They collected rabbit fecal pellets, which are sent to laboratories for DNA testing. For more details on regional monitoring, see our November 2017 issue.

Although we will have to wait several months for the DNA results from the

2018/2019 field season, we've processed last year's results. 109 sites were sampled in the winter of 2017/2018. Of those, 39 (35.7%) were found to be occupied by New England Cottontails. Eastern cottontails were present at 84 (77%) sites. Although nearly all sites that have New England cottontails are co-occupied by Eastern cottontails, 9 (8.3%) sites were occupied by New England cottontails only.

Eleven newly discovered populations have been documented in the towns of Litchfield, Warren, Kent, New Milford, Southbury, Newtown, and Montville. Some of the newly documented sites are especially exciting because there are no known populations



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within dispersal distance. This means that there may be more unknown populations in those areas.

In the years since we first began documenting NEC populations in 2000, we have been unable to re-document some populations. To a certain extent it is normal for populations to wink out and for new ones to pop up, especially for a species like NEC that live in ephemeral habitat—shrubland and young forest grow into mature forest. Most mature forests do not have dense enough understory for NEC to survive in, so populations are forced to disperse.

However, NEC are particularly vulnerable to predators during dispersal, and the landscape has been so altered by human activity that they often have no where to disperse to. This means that sometimes when a population winks out, no new one pops up nearby. This is one of the many difficulties NECs struggle with on the modern landscape.



Natural Resources Conservation Service

West-Central CT, a NEC Hotspot

When we create habitat for New England cottontails, we usually restrict our efforts to conservation focus areas. In 2011, 12 focus areas were created using NEC populations that were documented from 2000-2011 as well as computer modeling to identify desirable landscape characteristics.

NEC remain rare in most focus areas. However, we've found that the Newtown-Oxford, Lower Housatonic, Middle Housatonic, and Goshen Uplands focus areas remain strongholds for the species. Most of our newly documented populations from 2017/2018 occur in those focus areas, as well as all of the sites that contained only NEC (and no eastern cottontails) at the time of sampling.

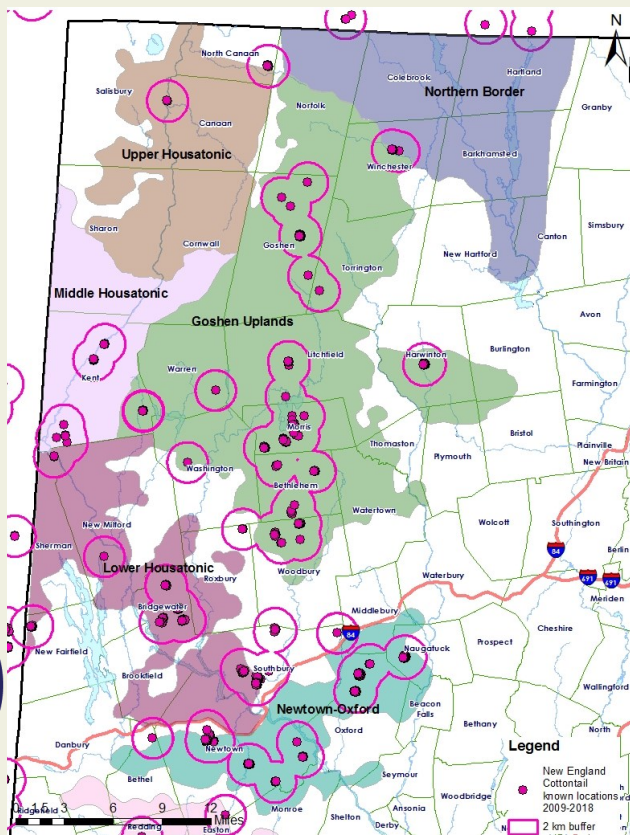
In the coming years, we will be redrawing focus area boundaries to include recently documented populations that were found outside of the Lower Housatonic focus area, in Southbury.

Recent telemetry data indicates that most NEC only travel about 500 meters (about 1,600 ft.) from where they were born, but they can disperse up to about 2 kilometers (1.24 miles). To visualize this, see the map on the following page. Each population has a 2 km circle around it—the distance a dispersing individual can reach. Many of our documented populations in this part of the state are close enough for those dispersal distances to overlap, which may allow for genetic exchange between populations.



Andrea Petrullo

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hance young forest habitat on your property. While our efforts will continue in all NEC focus areas, habitat in West-Central CT is especially important to the species.

In addition to our NEC focus areas, we continue to work in American woodcock focus areas throughout the state. For more information about our woodcock focus areas, [click here](#).

Contact Information

For more information, or to discuss a potential project, please contact the following:

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Our office location is:

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The following websites offer further information pertaining to young forest species:

- www.ct.gov/deep/youngforestinitiative
- www.newenglandcottontail.org
- www.timberdoodle.org
- www.youngforest.org
- www.ctnr.usda.gov/cottontail
- www.fws.gov/northeast/indepth/rabbit

What do you think?

We hope you find this newsletter informative and we welcome all comments. To submit recommendations or to unsubscribe, please email: andrea.petrullo@ct.gov



We continue to try to locate populations, even in parts of the state where they are more rare.

Moving Forward

We try our best to focus our conservation efforts where they will do the most good. New England cottontails don't travel very far and try not to leave the protective cover of thickets. Knowing where we have existing populations helps us to plan habitat patches more effectively. State Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) within dispersal distance of known populations will be evaluated for their habitat potential. As always, our partnerships with private landowners, sportsmen's clubs, land trusts, and conservation commissions are vital to the continuation of this conservation effort.

If you are a private landowner within one of these areas, we would be especially interested in working with you to create or en-