



# Marsh Rabbit

## North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Mark Buckler

## Marsh Rabbit

(*Sylvilagus palustris*)

There are three native species of rabbits in North Carolina. While the eastern cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) is found throughout the state and the Appalachian cottontail (*S. obscurus*) is restricted to the mountains of western North Carolina, the marsh rabbit (*S. palustris*) is found only in or near wet habitats in the eastern part of the state. Marsh rabbits differ from many other rabbit species in that they lead semiaquatic lives and are excellent swimmers.

Marsh rabbits are quite secretive. They live in thick bottomlands and swamps and are active primarily at night.

### Description

Marsh rabbits are medium-sized with coarse, dark brown fur, and smaller feet than many other species of rabbits. The dark, bluish-gray color of the underside of the tail distinguishes the marsh rabbit from all other rabbit species that occur within the same range and has led to the nickname “bluetail” that is commonly used in many localities. The marsh rabbit is also referred to as a “cane cutter,” due to its propensity to feed on switch cane, which is a tough, “woody” grass. This species is often incorrectly called a “swamp rabbit,” but the swamp rabbit (*S. aquaticus*) is a separate, distinct species that does not occur in North Carolina.

### History and Status

Marsh rabbit distribution is limited by the availability of wet lowland habitat in the Coastal Plain and parts of the Piedmont region of North Carolina. It is difficult to estimate the number of marsh rabbits in the state because of their secretive nature and preference for dense habitat. Furthermore, like most rabbit species, marsh rabbit populations fluctuate significantly, making it impractical to accurately estimate the actual population size at any given time. Marsh rabbits can be abundant when adequate areas of wet habitat are available, however, distribution can be impacted when habitat fragmentation limits movement and dispersal between suitable habitat.

During settlement of the state by Europeans, many citizens used all rabbit species, including the marsh rabbit, as sources of meat for food and fur for clothing. Marsh rabbits reproduce rapidly and are currently classified as a game animal in North Carolina. Today, rabbits are popular among North Carolinians for both sport and food hunting.

For more information on this species, including status and any applicable regulations, visit [www.ncwildlife.org/MarshRabbit](http://www.ncwildlife.org/MarshRabbit).

The marsh rabbit is one of three rabbit species native to North Carolina.



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### Range and Distribution

Marsh rabbits are native to the southeastern United States and are distributed throughout the Coastal Plain area from southeastern Virginia to southeastern Alabama and the Florida panhandle. In North Carolina, marsh rabbits are found throughout the Coastal Plain and eastern Piedmont regions, encompassing the eastern half of the state. While they may be found in the upper Coastal Plain and along rivers in the lower Piedmont, marsh rabbits are most abundant near the coast in large bottomland swamps, marshy areas and coastal islands.

### Range Map



■ Marsh Rabbit Range

# Marsh Rabbit

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### Habitats & Habits

Marsh rabbits, being semiaquatic animals, require dense habitat adjacent to a permanent water source, such as lakes, streams, canals, ditches, and wetlands. Like all rabbit species, marsh rabbits are completely herbivorous. Marsh rabbits prefer succulent roots, rhizomes, stems and bulbs of a variety of plants, but they will eat bark and twigs when preferred foods are scarce.

Marsh rabbits are nocturnal, meaning that they are primarily active at night, yet they may be observed during the day if humans or animals disturb them from their daytime hiding places. During the day, they rest in thick clumps of grasses and brush. Several marsh rabbits may be found together in areas of abundant food and cover, but females are sometimes territorial during the breeding season.

### Human Interactions

Many North Carolinians commonly see rabbits along roadsides or in yards, gardens and vegetable patches. However, most of these rabbits are the more prevalent and widespread eastern cottontail. Marsh rabbits are much less observable due to their secretive nature and preference for swampy, remote areas. Marsh rabbits rarely cause damage to crops or human cultivated plants.

### For More Information

Webster, W. D., J. F. Parnell, and W. C. Biggs, Jr. 2004. *Mammals of the Carolinas, Virginia, and Maryland*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA.

Whitaker, J. O., and W. J. Hamilton, Jr. 1998. *Mammals of the Eastern United States*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, USA.

### Wild Facts

#### Classification

Class: Mammalia

Order: Lagomorpha

#### Average Size

Length: ~15.8 – 17.8 in. (40.0 – 45.1 cm)

Weight: ~2.6 – 4.9 lbs. (1.2 – 2.2 kg)

#### Food

Rhizomes, bulbs, and other tender and succulent vegetation when available. Bark and twigs in winter.

#### Breeding/Young

In North Carolina, marsh rabbits probably breed from February through September, though marsh rabbits in the deep south may breed year-round. They average three or four litters per year, but are biologically capable of having up to six or seven litters in good habitat. Gestation period is 30-37 days.

Between two and five young marsh rabbits are born in each litter. Blind, almost hairless, and weighing just a few ounces at birth, marsh rabbit young are helpless and require a large amount of parental care. They are placed in a nest, which is a depression in the ground lined with vegetation and fur. Young rabbits open their eyes on the fourth or fifth day after birth, and are dependent on their mother for milk until they leave the nest in 12 to 15 days.

#### Life Expectancy

Capable of living up to 4 years in the wild, but most marsh rabbits die before the end of their first year.

#### Credits

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