## New England cottontail poised for a comeback

States, federal agencies collaborate to increase the numbers of the reclusive rabbit

BY DEBORAH MCDERMOTT YORK WEEKLY

KITTERY POINT - As agricultural land was abandoned in southern Maine in the early 20th century, forests grew where there were once fields and development started encroaching — leaving a shrinking habitat for the New England cottontail rabbit, a once ubiquitous species indigenous to the region.

Where once thousands lived in shrubby patches that extended as far north as Belfast, today about 300 survive at the known northern edge of the range in York and Cumberland counties. In the past 60 years, say officials, the range in Maine has decreased by more than 80 percent. The number of New England cottontails is not much greater in most of the other New England states — in fact it's estimated only about 100 live in New Hampshire.

But, Peter Cottontail is poised for a comeback.

Wildlife officials from all six states, as well as New York and federal agencies, formed a collaboration with the goal of increasing the population of these small, reclusive rabbits. Formed in 2012, the New England Cottontail Conservation Initiative has a goal to create 27,000 acres of habitat in the seven-state region capable of supporting 13,500 New England cottontails by 2030. The effort is beginning to pay off. Just recently, the U.S. Department of Interior took the New England cottontail off the list of species under consideration for protection under the Endangered Species Act. It is still on the state endangered list in Maine and New Hampshire, however.

"There's always that end prize of seeing a rabbit coming onto a site, but it's more than that," said Kelly Boland, New England cottontail resto-

The New England Cottontail Conservation Initiative has a goal to create 27,000 acres of habitat in the seven-state region capable of supporting 13,500 New England cottontails by 2030. The effort is beginning to pay off.

for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "The fact is, it was here before all of us. It's part of our native ecosystem. And the question is, do we want it to go away on our watch?"

Boland has worked in southern Maine since the collaborative formed, identifying key parcels near patches where there have been cottontail sightings in the past and working with willing landowners to create a patch.

Cottontails, she said, are not migratory and tend to stay within their patch, ideally about 25 acres. It thrives in tangled, low-growing shrubs found in younger forests, she said. The ideal environment is a densely thicketed area with deciduous trees and shrubs that grow between 5 and 15 feet — and are not allowed to grow taller, as that's when they begin to thin. It typically takes seven years to create the right environment, she said.

Cottontails are herbivores, munching on grass in the summer and bark, buds and twigs in the winter. Boland said as the habitat decreased, cottontails have been found starving and "struggling to

"So it's a matter of whether they will make it through the winter to breed the next year," she said. "Less and less of them were surviving the winter, and some of the patches were getting small enough that they couldn't find food. The less food, the more risky behaviors they are willing to take," and so many are lost to predators.

ration coordinator for Maine ronment is attracting many other species, some not necessarily seen before, including birds, butterflies, woodcocks and other rabbit species. "If you're waiting for one rabbit to show up, it can be tough," she said. "But when you see this increase in species diversity, you have something to watch while you wait.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has maps of historical patches throughout the cottontail's range. Five different meta populations were identified in western Connecticut/New York, eastern Connecticut/Rhode Island, Cape Cod, the Merrimack Valley and the Dover/Rollinsford area of New Hampshire and the two Maine counties. Within Maine, areas have been identified in Kittery, York, Eliot/the Berwicks, Wells and Scarborough/Cape Elizabeth, said Boland.

It can take some convincing, particularly of private landowners, to take forested land, essentially clear cut it, and then plant low shrubs and trees that takes years to fill in. "The initial look is not something most people find beautiful," she said. "It does take a few years for the vegetation to fill in, and we acknowledge that up front.'

Many landowners can avail themselves of federal grants that can be used to develop the patch, which can ease the burden, and Boland develops a management plan and walks all the land. Today, she said, there are more than 40 patches comprising 1,100 acres in various As patches are developed, stages of development on



A New England cottontail rabbit reared at Roger Williams Park Zoo in 2012 acclimates to the wild by first living in large fenced-in areas that protects it from predators.

servation land, private land and in one instance, on townowned land in Wells.

South Berwick farmer Charlie Baer is setting aside 13 of his 80-acre parcel to create a patch. When he was approached by Boland, he was skeptical, he admits. "But I love the out of doors and wildlife and I'm all for protecting native species," he said. As the land has just been cleared in the past year, he admits it's still in its unsightly stage, but he has no regrets. "Certainly, it will benefit a lot of different wildlife," he said. "I'm interested to see what will happen."

The York Land Trust has a five-year-old, 30-acre patch at Highland Farm Reserve managed by land trust staff. We've augmented fields and shrubbery by cutting some old growth forest," said stewardship director Joe Anderson. He actively manages the site, ridding the land of inva- In January 2017, he said, the said Boland, the shrub envi-state and federal land, con-sive species and working department is expected to ap-

with volunteers to prune trees and shrubs when neces-

"It takes a lot of work, but it's a very positive effort," he said, adding he's already various species he hasn't before on the proper-

Anderson is hoping that, one day, Highland Farm will be the site of a captive release of a cottontail — similar to the effort undertaken at a Dover, N.H., farm recently. But unlike in New Hampshire, the Maine Legislature passed a law stating endangered animals can't be introduced into the state without its approval.

'So the department (of inland fisheries and wildlife) has been scratching its head on this a bit," said IFW wild-life biologist Walter Jakubas, "because the commissioner does have the authority to restore endangered species.'

proach the Legislature — "whether seeking their approval or just to have a discussion" — about introducing some captive cottontails. "We're hoping that within two years, we'll identify a property where they can be

In the meantime, Maine is working with its New Hampshire and federal counterparts to develop a captive breeding compound at the Great Bay National Wildlife Refuge in Newington, N.H. "When we approach the Legislature, we want all our ducks in a row.'

Anderson said it would be great if Maine chose Highland Farm as the first location to release the rabbits. While he hasn't seen evidence of any New England cottontails yet, he is always on the lookout. "I've been fooled a few times, but I'm keeping the dream alive," he said. "I can't wait for the day when, all of a sudden, they're there."

## Houlton vendors positive about market as season nears end

**BY JEN LYNDS** 

HOULTON—The leaves in the community are starting to turn, and pumpkins are already up for sale by vendors affiliated with the Houlton Community Market.

And even though the market officially closes on Columbus Day, Oct. 12, the board that oversees the market and the Greater Houlton Chamber of Commerce is already reflecting on this year's successes and planning ahead for next year.

Located in Market Square, the market is held from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. every Saturday from Memorial Day Weekend to Columbus Day. This season, more than 30 vendors offering bread, vegetables, cheese, doughnuts, jewelry, jams and more participated.

Kathryn Harnish and her husband, Rob Lawless, who run Took A Leap Farm, a small goat dairy farm and state-licensed creamery, are among the vendors who sell their wares at the community market. Lawless also is president of the market board and



Lisa Richardson, owner of Dakota Dreaming Montana Wishes in Patten, sells knitted hats. She has sold some of the hats, pictured, at the Houlton Community Market, which runs from May to Columbus Day each year.

Harnish is a member. Har- despite the fact that it lost this year," she said. "I think nish said during a recent interview that she thought the

Veterans Day is Wednesday, November 11, 2015

some vendors from last year. "Some of the vendors we market had a successful year, had in the past did not return But we also have three new

some of that was due to scheduling and busy lives. might have vendors who join mid-season or near the end of the season. We now have glass artists and a vendor offering crocheted hats and one who makes jewelry out of found objects.

In May, organizers had hoped to make a change to how the market was run by closing a section of the downtown to vehicle traffic on the northern side of Market Square when the market was taking place. That did not end up working, and the idea was scuttled after two weeks following complaints from motorists and downtown store owners.

'The whole idea behind doing that was to create a more community atmosphere," she said. "We want people to get together and catch up. But we are getting there. We have live music most weekends, and we are getting more toward the festival atmosphere."

Jane Torres, executive director of the Greater Houlton Chamber of Commerce, agrees. She said that the num-

vendors who just joined. So ber of vendors at the market it is kind of a fluid thing. You fluctuated between 30 and 36 this summer. There were 36 vendors last year.

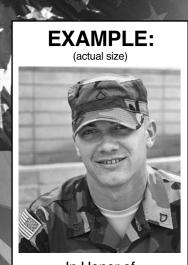
"We have some great products, and we are always looking for that true farmers mar ket feel," she said. "I would like to see a higher number of vendors sign up. I also think that we need more produce out for sale.'

Harnish said that the market "is always looking for more diversity.

"There are not too many people selling eggs," she said. "I'd like to see jams make a comeback. But we've got wonderful baked goods from the Amish, cheese and vegetables.'

Lisa Richardson, owner of Dakota Dreaming Montana Wishes in Patten, said in a recent interview that she has found great success at the market. Richardson sells handcrafted hats knitted to look like frogs, horses, cats and various other characters.

"I have sold 100 or more hats on just one Saturday," said Richardson. "I have been very happy going to the market there.



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