

Cottontail Rabbit Status Report, 2016

Agriculture and Grassland Wildlife Program Note 16-1



photo by Adele Hodde

2015-16 Hunter Harvest

Harvest estimates used in this report are based upon results from the 2015-16 Illinois Hunter Harvest Survey. An estimated 23,586 hunters (down 32%) harvested 113,399 rabbits (down 16%). Rabbit hunters averaged 0.87 rabbits per trip (up 10%) in the 2015-16 hunting season. This was the third year rabbit season ended February 15.

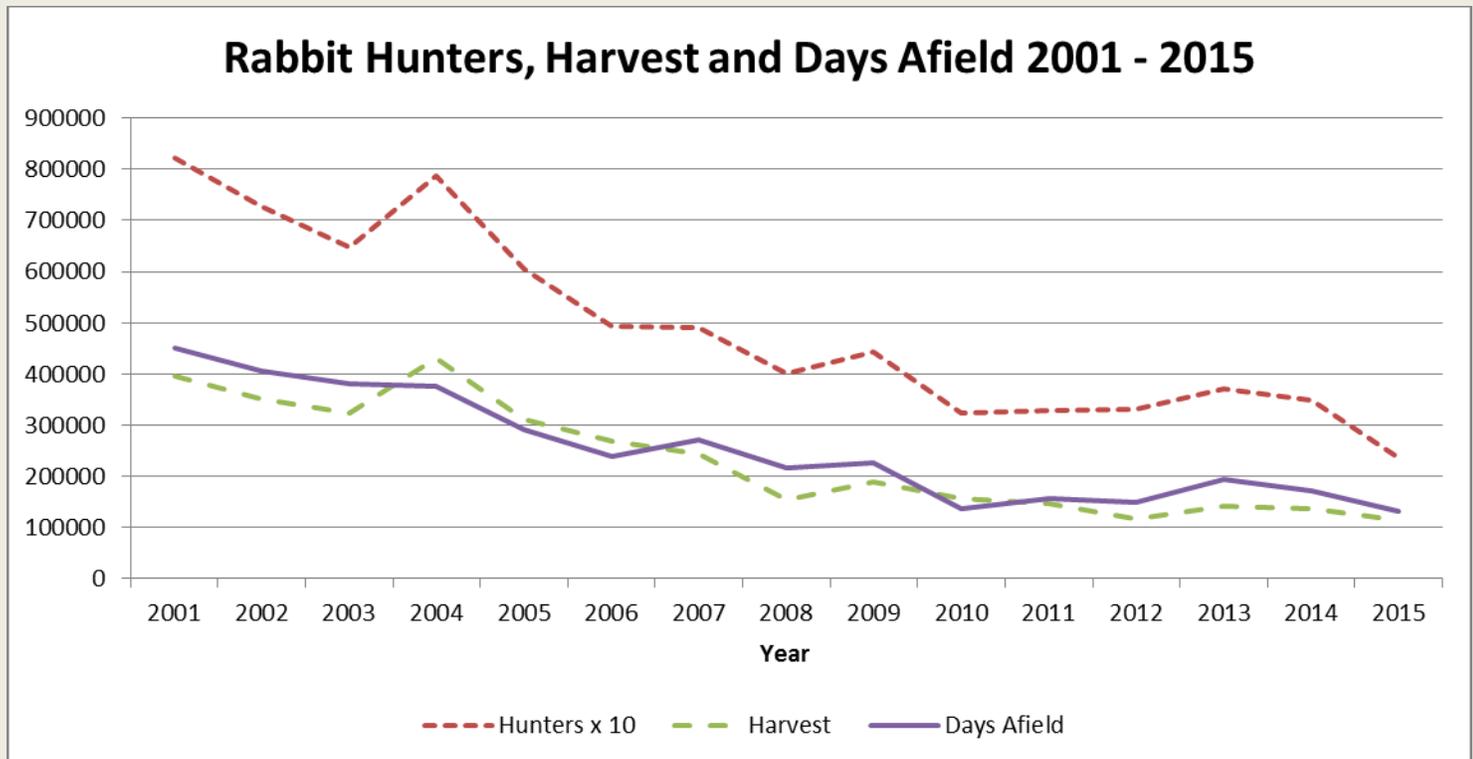


Figure 1. Rabbit Hunters, Harvest and Days Afield 2001 - 2015

Weather 2015-16

The fall of 2015 was mild and wetter than average. Except for some flooding at the end of December, winter weather brought above average temperatures and below average precipitation. This trend continued through spring and into the summer. However, July and August were also warmer than average, and heavy rains fell on much of the state during these months. The wet weather delayed mowing in many areas, leaving cover in ditches and along field edges to the end of August. Overall, 2016 weather conditions were fair for rabbits during their peak breeding season.

Rabbit Population Index

The road-kill index provides a measure of rabbit trends for Illinois that has been recorded since 1975. The road-kill index is calculated by tracking the number of road-killed rabbits counted in June and July per thousand miles traveled by observers. This year's road-kill index was 4% higher than 2015 with 1.66 rabbits per 1000 miles traveled.

Cottontail Rabbit Road-kill Indices 1975-2016

(Rabbits counted per 1000 miles traveled)

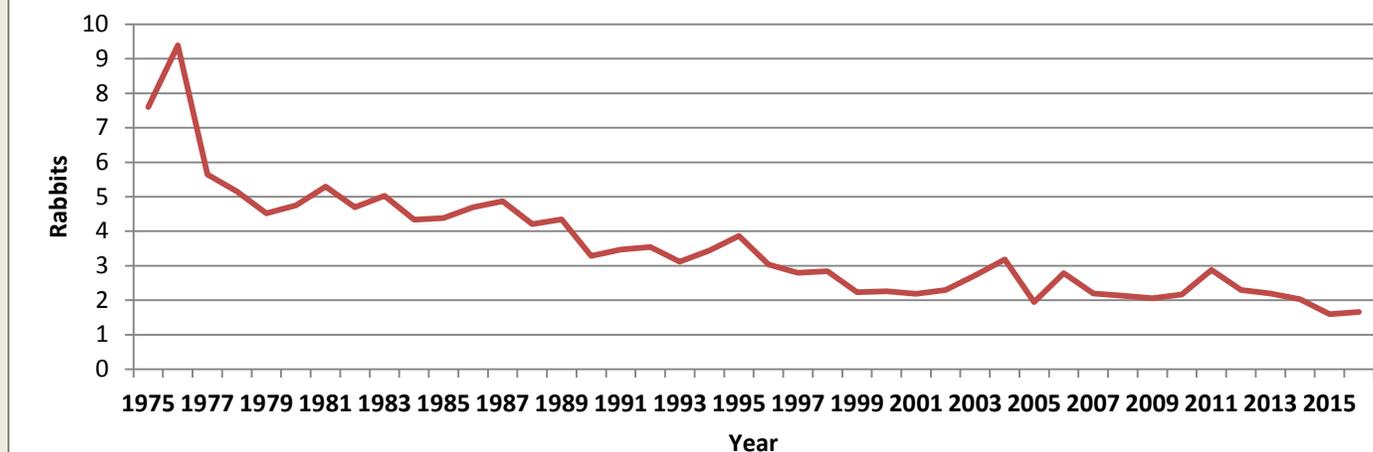


Figure 2. Cottontail Rabbit Road-kill Indices 1975 - 2016

2016-17 Season Outlook

Statewide trends show that rabbit numbers are roughly the same as last year's levels, so in areas with good habitat, hunters should find good numbers of rabbits. Even though the data show a lower harvest last season, several biologists and hunters in different parts of the state have mentioned that rabbit numbers appeared to be higher than previous years in localized areas. It is also noteworthy that the number of rabbits per day was up slightly for hunters last season, and the number of hunters was down.

The pace of fall harvest for Illinois is slightly ahead of schedule with corn harvest 10% ahead of the 5-year average and soybean harvest are just slightly behind average. This should find most of the crops out of the fields by the time upland game season opens.

Best Areas

Look for farms with a mix of small fields with shrubby fencerows, old pasture, forest edges and areas of young or recently harvested timber. The most productive areas for rabbit hunting continue to be in west-central and southern Illinois. Based on the average annual harvest estimates from 1997 through 2015, some of the top counties are: Bond, Calhoun, Clay, Clinton, Madison, Marion and Wayne

Season Dates

November 5, 2016 – February 15, 2017 (Statewide)

Hours

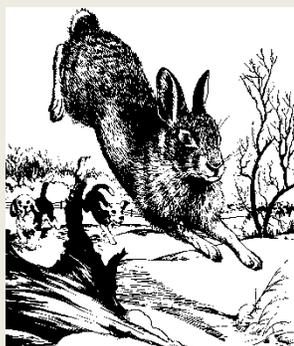
Sunrise to Sunset

Bag Limits

4 per day with 10 in possession after the 3rd day



photo by Adele Hodde



Prepared by Stan McTaggart 10/16

Illinois Department of Natural Resources

Division of Wildlife Resources

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