

Did you know there's an Illinois rabbit that actually likes to hit the water?

# Rabbit, Swim

Story By Joe McFarland  
Photos By SIU Cooperative  
Wildlife Research Laboratory

**C**ottontail rabbits everywhere hop across the land on those large, lucky feet. But did you know a lesser-known rabbit called *Sylvilagus aquaticus* has figured out a perfect way to take advantage of that flipper-footed endowment?

Big feet, it turns out, are perfect for swimming. But who knew rabbits swim? The fact is, all rabbits *can* swim—if necessary. But a specific rabbit commonly known as the swamp rabbit routinely swims to navigate much of its preferred habitat.

The problem is, wildlife biologists studying these sometimes-aquatic mammals determined that swamp rabbit habitat isn't what it used to be. In fact, according to Southern Illinois University researchers, 90 percent of the forest wetlands once present in Illinois no longer survive.

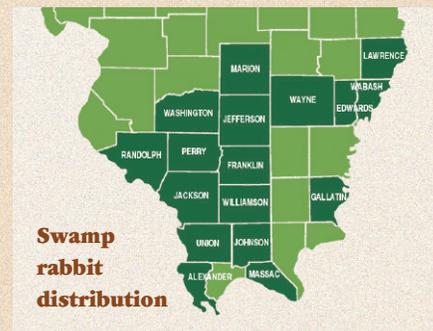


“Remaining bottomland forest habitats in Illinois are largely fragmented,” explained wildlife researchers Dr. Alan Woolf and Michael Barbour in their 2002 status report prepared for DNR, “and the existing swamp rabbit (*Sylvilagus aquaticus*) population exists as a (scattered) metapopulation.”

After examining those patches of disconnected rabbit populations, one of the findings was that there's more available habitat than swamp rabbits currently utilize. Why didn't they just hop over? One theory holds that individual populations might have disappeared for any number of reasons after being isolated, and neighboring populations were too distant to reach.

It's why a group of SIU wildlife researchers led by Clay Nielsen and Eric Shauber decided to live-trap swamp rabbits from thriving locations and release

them into promising sites elsewhere. The project's goal was to determine how “swamper” populations fare after being relocated into new sites, then evaluate the feasibility of future reintroductions. Elsewhere in the U.S. and worldwide, relocation projects met with mixed success: Some rabbits fared quite well after being released. But mortality from predators was quite high in other studies. The trial project,





**Roughly similar in appearance to cottontails, the swamp rabbit is typically heavier, weighing 4-6 lbs. compared with 2-4 lbs. for cottontails.**

DNR biologist Mike Wefer notes a habitat study conducted by SIU-C graduate student Joanne Crawford during the severe spring flooding of 2011 in southern Illinois revealed a curiously fatal choice made by these swimming rabbits.

“Swamp rabbits can swim, but they won’t cross a road,” Wefer said. “They could easily hop across a road if they chose to do it. But their affinity for their habitat made them stay put.”

Although these rabbits famously swim for short distances, they do not actually live in the water. In fact, they’ll eventually drown if they don’t reach dry land. What occurred during the spring floods was a self-defeating case of reluctance to move to higher ground: As flood waters rose and

habitat became inundated, the swamp rabbits chose to remain in their familiar habitat instead of hopping across roadways to reach dry land.

The findings beg the question: Could the many roads that now exist in swamp rabbit habitat throughout its native range be one of the reasons for chronically isolated populations? If so, future management of this native rabbit species might literally be at a crossroads.

Protecting the native wildlife in Illinois, including populations that are at the fringes of their historical range, might appear to be a sinking proposition. Yet Woolf noted there is good reason to do whatever we can to prevent further losses to Illinois’ natural resources. And since sportsmen themselves have an interest in this popular game species, the taxes hunters pay on firearms and ammunition (Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration funds) can be used to better understand how to keep *Sylvilagus aquaticus* afloat in Illinois.

“Swampers are a unique member of Illinois’ fauna,” the late researcher explained. “Since their continued existence in our state depends on our active management, this is a good example of how DNR uses sportsmen’s dollars to preserve our native fauna.”

completed in 2005, revealed the former outcome: There is no shortage of hungry predators in southern Illinois.

During the winter season of 2003-04, 17 swamp rabbits were trapped in southern Illinois and released into promising habitat in Wayne County. Predators killed 10 of the 14 rabbits that died after the release. No additional releases have occurred since.

Further research studied the specific habitat types where swamp rabbits currently exist, along with the evolving habitat being created where wetlands used for agriculture have been restored to bottomland forest.

And we continue to learn more about the needs and preferences of this unusual Illinois rabbit. A recent study revealed an important behavioral trait that suggests why isolated populations remain isolated.

**S**wamp rabbits are found in localized populations in southern Illinois. If hunters have the rare opportunity to harvest swamp rabbits, they and cottontails both count toward daily or possession limits. A limit can include a mix of either species but the mixed-bag combination cannot exceed the total limit allowed for rabbits. For additional information, consult the Illinois Digest of Hunting and Trapping Regulations, available under the Hunting/Trapping link at [www.dnr.illinois.gov/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.dnr.illinois.gov/Pages/default.aspx).

