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Tracking the New England cottontail

By **SHELLEY BORBANK**
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Now that snow has fallen in the area, seventh-grade science students in Patrick Parent's class at Massabesic Middle School will be outside doing fieldwork and collecting data on the endangered New England cottontail.

The information the students gather will be included in a joint project being conducted by the York County Soil & Water Conservation District, Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to determine how the animal is faring in southern Maine,

according to Melissa Brandt, who works for YCS&WCD.

Brandt conducted training at the school Jan. 15 to prepare students for the fieldwork. They will be working along the pole lines in Waterboro, an area that has been cut and allowed to grow up into thick scrub, which provides a lot of habitat for the cottontail. "Waterboro is on the border of the focus area for the wildlife survey," said Brandt.

Since 1950, there has been an 80 percent decline in the New England cottontail population in Maine. In New Hampshire, the species is almost at collapse. Generally, the animal's habitat is



The New England cottontail is endangered. COURTESY PHOTO

east of I-95, but the students will be looking to see if there are any little pockets of cottontails left in this area.

The students will be looking for and recording cottontail tracks, said Brandt, which is why snow is important for this project. Ideally, the survey should be done

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Students from Mr. Parent's class seventh-grade science class practice collecting pellet samples using cocoa cereal during a training presentation by the York County Soil & Water Conservation District.

PHOTO BY SHELLEY BURBANK

COTTONTAILS

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36 hours after a snowstorm with at least two inches of snow in order to get the most accurate number of tracks.

"If you can count the number of tracks, you can estimate how many rabbits there are," Brandt said. Basic equipment for the project includes a track guide, a GPS unit for recording the location of the tracks, a ruler or measuring tape to show scale, a camera to photograph evidence of the tracks and a pellet collection kit with sterile test tubes. According to Brandt, scientists will be able to tell how healthy the rabbit is from its pellets, so it is important to keep the pellets sterile.

"This is official data you are collecting," Brandt told the students. "It's going out to biologists, and they will use the data you are collecting."

After the presentation inside, the classes went outside the school to enthusiastically practice collecting pellet samples by using cocoa cereal thrown onto the snow.

Brandt said she really enjoys the educational outreach part of

Facts about the New England cottontail

- Bears, bobcats, coyotes and domestic cats are all predators of the rabbit
- While snowshoe hares turn white in winter, cottontails remain brown
- They only live two years
- They live in a small home range of one-quarter acre to eight acres
- They can give birth every 30 days with litters of seven to eight.
- A common Maine name for the cottontail is "coonies."

What can be done to help the cottontail

- Tell landowners how good scrub land is for wildlife habitat. Share your knowledge.
- Look for tracks and report them to Maine Inland Fisheries & Wildlife
- Support land conservation programs
- Volunteer by helping plant shrubs or other work.
- Keep cats inside the house—domestic cats like to kill rabbits, but they don't eat them for food.

her job. "I went to Massabesic back when it was a junior high. I had a really good science education here, graduated from Massabesic High School, went to Unity College for my degree, and then got the job at the Soil and Water District," she said. "I'm just excited to connect with Mr. Parent and get to talk to the students."

OPINION

LETTERS

The other side of the cottontail coin

The New England cottontail, a beautiful, gentle creature struggling to survive at the northern end of its range. What landowner would not be pleased to help this endangered creature survive and prosper?

Well, let me tell you a little something about Maine's punitive wildlife habitat protection laws and how they can affect the unfortunate property owners who actually harbor these creatures, the 30-some-odd other endangered creatures, endangered plants or any of the "Significant Wildlife Habitat" as decreed by the state.

Let's say you own 20 acres. And just for fun, let's say that you have allowed a school group to survey for and document the presence of New England cottontail rabbits on your property. Now let's also say that you are counting on this property for any number of reasons: a future home site, income from the working woods, collateral for a loan or just the future sale of it to generate income for retirement or school for your kids.

Well, you, my friend, have made a grievous error. With your property mapped as habitat you just lost most of the use of it and much of its value, courtesy of the Maine Endangered Species Act. What do you mean, you say. What has the Maine Endangered Species Act done to me?

First, the law provides that a state agency or municipal government may not issue permits that

will allow significant alteration of the habitat.

What this means to you is that if you are allowed to use even a small portion of it to build a home or business it will only be after you file for a variance, show that there will be no harm and endure a public hearing, a lengthy and no doubt expensive process.

Second, you have to look at the value of your now encumbered property; a simple comparison will highlight this.

You want to buy 20 acres; you have two lots in mind. The land is priced the same and comparable in every way except one is cottontail habitat, its use severely curtailed, and the other is not.

Which would you pay more for? Would you even buy the habitat lot? Even if you were looking to buy the land to give it to the rabbits would you still use the encumbrance to negotiate a lower price?

Lastly, Maine provides no compensation for your loss. None. If the land is now useless to you, if its value is now thousands less than it would otherwise have been, the state's answer to you is, "Too bad."

This is just one scenario involving one animal. There are many other habitats and animals affecting people and their right to use, enjoy or derive economic benefit from their property all across the state. For example, if you live near any kind of water (including what are called vernal

pools) or have any of the listed plants and animals dwelling on your property you are very likely affected by these costly (to you) laws.

Many in the environmental industry and state agencies see these repressive, punitive laws as wonderful reflections of society's commitment to our environment and as tributes to themselves for their foresight and diligence in getting them passed. I see something else entirely. I see short-sighted, bullying, repressive, punitive laws that most of society did not ask for (but since it costs almost nothing they now support). I see laws that, while intended to help nature, have only managed to help nature the enemy, turning people otherwise willing to help into those that will do what they can, what they have to do, to prevent disastrous financial loss.

If Maine and its people really want to help New England cottontails and all the other endangered creatures, then they would amend laws to seek voluntary action where there is willingness and to provide compensation where there is not and get rid of the unjust, harmful and bullying "taking" that goes on now.

I live next to a swamp and I've lost property to "water fowl and wading bird habitat."

My land is posted.

*Anthony Garrity
West Newfield*



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Fieldwork brings science to life



By **SHELLEY BORBANK**
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Following through on their New England Cottontail (NEC) survey plans, seventh-grade students from Massabesic Middle School trudged up the snow-covered power line on the Old Alfred Road Feb. 13 and 14 to look for tracks and pellets in the scrub brush. According to volunteer and school staff, traversing the terrain was tough going, but the educational opportunity brought science out of the textbook and into real life.

"The snow was pretty deep up there," said Tim Hart, a volunteer graduate student from the University of New England and a Fellow with National Science Foundation

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COTTONTAIL

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GK-12 Program, a partnership that connects graduate students in the science and technology fields with school children. "It's about outreach," Hart said, explaining the purpose of the program. "We get the students involved in a research project that gives them an idea, a realistic view of science in general."

Melissa Brandt from the York County Soil and Water Conservation District, who provided training to the students prior to the actual field work, led the group into the habitat to look for signs. "We found some deer scrapes, snowshoe rabbit tracks, and a snowshoe rabbit pellet," she said. "We didn't find any evidence of cottontail yet. There was a lot of thick shrubbery, and definitely a lot of snowshoe."

Students benefit from the hands-on educational experience of being out in the field, doing real work, say educators. "I think the outdoor 'real' work done brings the concepts alive and makes textbook information real," said science teacher, Patrick Parent. "I hope that students learn that there are no easy answers in science and whether we find NEC or not, good information is provided so more informed decisions can be made in the future."

The students and York County Soil & Water were given permission by the landowner to survey the property for the cottontail, Brandt said, speaking to the issues of property rights and environmental protection which often seem to be at odds. She said that some landowners are interested in knowing what they have on their property. Some want the information and have come to understand the importance of conservation and the concept of multiple uses for property. Conservation groups will not survey property without the landowner's permission, Brandt also emphasized. In addition, landowners can enter into protective agreements like the Candidate Conservation Agreement with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service or National Ma-

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— MELISSA BRANDT
YORK COUNTY SOIL & WATER

rine Fisheries Service which protects landowners from "incidental takes" of candidate species.

"There can be a balance between wildlife and people," Brandt said.

In addition, sometimes maintaining habitat is mutually beneficial to both property owner and wildlife. Pole lines are a good example. "Power line shrubby growth is just the sort of habitat

NEC need. Early successional forest is great habitat for lots of wildlife and CMP (Central Maine Power) needs to maintain the pole line area to keep it like that so their lines are not compromised by tree growth. This is a great area for NEC to be present now and a good place to look," explained Parent.

Parent said that his classes have discussed the issues related to endangered species, exploring the idea that there are no easy answers and that many questions remain unanswered. He also emphasized that the cost of environmental protection should not fall only on the landowners. "I don't think anyone wants to see any animals become extinct. Taking away rights of property owners is certainly not the best long term approach. It really is not fair that landowners of endangered species habitat pay for all of us by losing use of their land. We all need to pay our fair share to prevent extinctions."

According to Parent, the purpose of the NEC survey was "strictly for the science experience" and not to take a stand on either side of the issue. From an educational point of view, this kind of real field work is exciting and valuable.