

None in the Brush

By Chris Grondahl



RON WILSON

The cottontail rabbit is an overlooked and underutilized resource.

I didn't know what to think when an acquaintance in Bismarck got in touch with me a couple years ago and said a local landowner he knew had an overabundance of cottontail rabbits on his property that needed some thinning.

At first, I had to wade through memories of cottontail hunting in the Missouri River bottoms more than 30 years ago. And then I had to wonder what had taken me away from this great reason to be with friends and family in winter after fall hunting pursuits had been stored to memory.

Being a young hunter and learning the importance of hunting, and the close bond one develops with a parent or guardian and the natural world, are things everyone should experience. People are just now talking about how important being outdoors is to the formation of a solid individual. I doubt those who took us hunting even thought there would be a time when kids wouldn't be outdoors.

At a young age, my part of those original rabbit hunts was to wander under the cottonwood forest canopy and underbrush in hopes of flushing a rabbit or two. The older hunters, resting atop fallen logs, waited for a rabbit to pass underneath or beside them for that perfect shot. We learned the reason for taking the good shot, and grew up respecting this requirement for becoming a good hunter.

Experiencing the hunt as a young participant, and being outdoors enjoying the scenery and stillness of a winter morning, is something that leaves little to desire. It is likely what made me think about a friend who had lost his father at a fairly young age, but not before hunting was permanently instilled.

He had just gotten busy running his own business, and in addition to not having his hunting partner, likely hadn't been jarred loose from a hectic life many of us have adopted. I wondered if the person who renewed my interest in rabbit hunting would mind if we added a third to the hunt.

The three of us struck out one weekend morning when the sun was out and the air still. Our hunt came after a few days of wind and snow, making the conditions on this day perfect for rabbits to be active and for the human eye to spy them against a contrasting background.

One of the appeals of rabbit hunting is that it takes little preparation and is often available close to home. The most simple of instruments are required, generally in the form of a .22-caliber rifle or shotgun with light loads. Residents can participate without purchasing a hunting license. This seems like the perfect recipe to get a first-timer into the field. (Speaking of recipes, rabbits are also excellent table fare.)

The attraction to hunt cottontails should be even more appealing considering rabbits are as numerous as they've ever been. Cottontail populations are cyclic, meaning they naturally build from low to high, before going back the other way. The recent increase in rabbit numbers may be connected to the decrease in furbearing predators that eat them. Mange, a mite that causes hair loss in furbearing mammals, has certainly reduced overall predator numbers. There are likely other factors, but nevertheless, cottontails are doing well.

There are three species of cottontails in North Dakota. The Eastern cottontail is distributed statewide and is slightly larger than the other two. Desert cottontails are found primarily south and west of the Missouri River. Nuttall's cottontail is found in the extreme west and northwestern parts of the state. Even though there are three species, they are not easily distinguished by casual observation.

Locating rabbits is quite easy. They are creatures that prefer dense, brushy ground cover where they can feed and quickly find refuge from predators. In North Dakota, river bottoms and other places such as shelterbelts and natural brush patches are preferred habitats. In the rougher terrain in the badlands, rabbits are most often located in drainages and slopes with adequate brushy cover. Cottontails are most active during a period beginning in the evening and ending sometime after sunrise. Since they do not hibernate, rabbits can often be found sunning themselves during the middle of a winter day.

Our quest for cottontails continued last winter. This time we recruited my wife to take part in the hunt. In the end, I can thank a friend for revitalizing both our interests in an old tradition and an untapped small game resource. We also brought back a "lost" hunter from the past who, by the way, will be joining us in deer camp this fall.

We all have someone to thank for getting us outdoors when we were young. Since we didn't do our part to get some kids out the last two winters, that will be a personal goal this year. I challenge everyone to do the same to ensure the tradition continues.

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The reward for tromping through the snow and beating the brush is oftentimes a cottontail or two.