

# 2022-2023 Rabbit Report

## Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources



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## Introduction

The Small Game Program is administered under the Wildlife Division of Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KDFWR). The KDFWR is an agency of the Kentucky Tourism, Arts & Heritage Cabinet. It is overseen by a nine-member commission who are nominated by Kentucky’s sportsmen and sportswomen. Commission members are appointed by the Governor. The department employs about 400 full-time staff, which includes conservation officers, wildlife and fisheries biologists, conservation educators, and information and technology, public relations, customer service and administrative professionals.

KDFWR receives no money from the state’s General Fund. Funding is provided by the sale of hunting and fishing licenses, boating registration fees and federal funds, including grants based on the number of hunting and fishing licenses sold in the state.

The Small Game Program is tasked with managing squirrels (fox and gray), rabbits (swamp, eastern cottontail, and Appalachian cottontail), and northern bobwhite in the state to provide ample hunting opportunity while balancing the needs of consumptive and non-consumptive user groups. The

Small Game Program is led by Cody M. Rhoden, Program Coordinator and supported by Chelcee Hendren, Small Game Program Technician. Program staff are based out of the KDFWR Headquarters in Frankfort.

### Population Status

The rabbit population in Kentucky is indexed in two ways: rabbits seen per 100 miles and rabbits jumped per hour afield hunting. These two indices are based on the Rural Mail Carrier Survey and Hunter Cooperator Logs, respectively.

### Rural Mail Carrier Survey

The Rural Mail Carrier Survey represents the first survey used to monitor rabbit populations across the state. Mail carriers recorded rabbit and quail observations as they traveled their rural delivery routes during the last full week of July (6 delivery days). Survey cards provided space for observations of rabbits for each of the survey days. Observers also recorded the number of days surveyed, the length of the route, and the total miles driven. The mail carrier data are used to forecast the upcoming hunting season, monitor the population, and estimate rabbit productivity.

The Mail Carrier Survey provides a glimpse of what we can expect for the upcoming hunting season. The survey is the oldest in the program being completed for 63 years. Although no population estimates can be derived from these data, it does provide valuable trend information showing whether the population is up, down, or stable (Table 1).

#### 2023 Survey Statistics

- ❖ Mail Carriers returned **381** survey cards
- ❖ Total miles driven = **144,592**
- ❖ Total rabbits seen = **2,735**
- ❖ Statewide observation rate = **1.9 rabbits/100 miles traveled**

**Table 1. Mail Carrier indices and rates of change in Kentucky, 1961-2023.**

REGION <sup>1</sup>	TOTAL RABBITS/100 MILES			PERCENT CHANGE	
	MEAN (average)			MEAN (average)	
	1961-2022*	2022	2023	1961-2023	2022 to 2023
West	-	0.82	1.02	-	24%
Central	-	2.12	2.1	-	-1%
Bluegrass	-	2.04	2.12	-	4%
East	-	3.06	2.52	-	-18%
<b>Statewide</b>	<b>2.06</b>	<b>2.02</b>	<b>1.89</b>	<b>-21%</b>	<b>-6%</b>

(-) = data was not analyzed by west, central, bluegrass, east until 2011  
<sup>1</sup>See Appendix 1 on page 11 for Region breakdown

Over the last 63 years of this survey, the decline in the rabbit population is evident (Figure 1). The severe drop in population levels following the winters of 1977 and 1978 was dramatic and populations have been slow to recover. The overall drop in rabbit numbers since the late 1960’s can be generally attributed to habitat loss because of land use changes and cleaner agricultural practices. However, recent years have seen a nice increase in the number of rabbits observed. This year (2023) we did observe a slight decrease from last year (2022), which can likely be attributed to the cyclical nature of rabbit population size in Kentucky (Table 1). The increases observed in the Western and Bluegrass weather regions is a welcome sight at 24% and 4% respectively. The winter was mild which potentially favored high overwinter survivorship and excellent breeding condition for does.

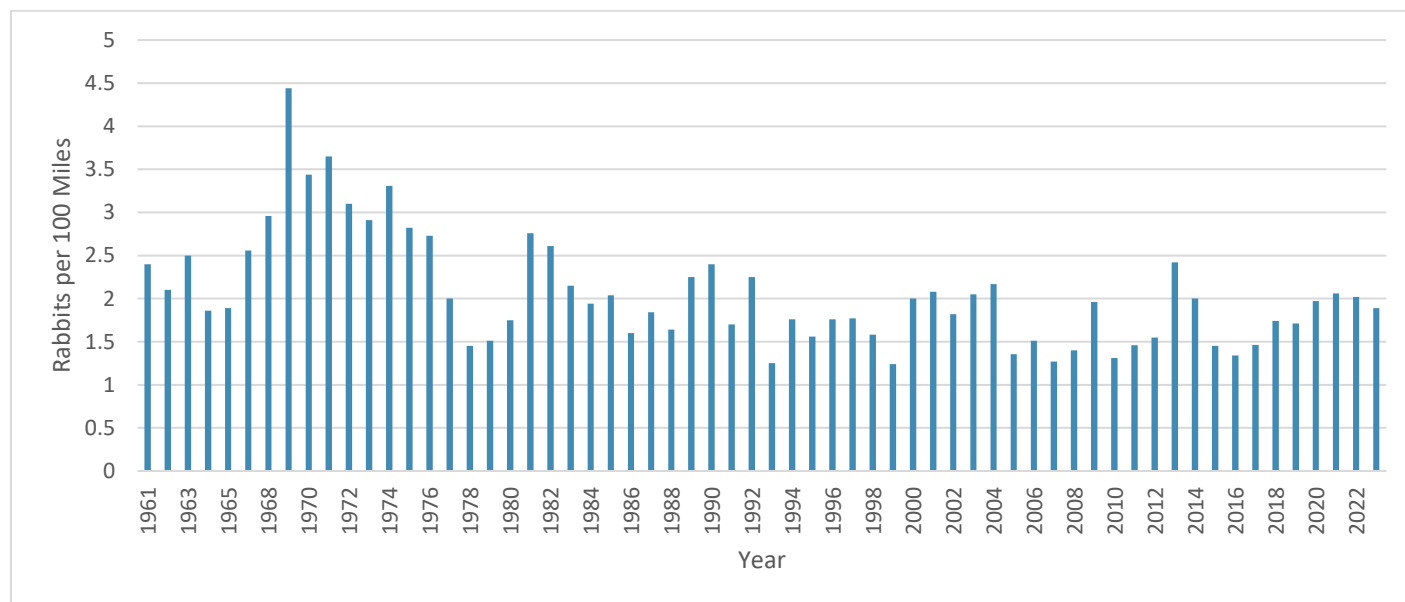


Figure 1. Rabbits observed per 100 miles during the Rural Mail Carrier Survey from 1961 through 2023.

## 2022-2023 Rabbit Hunter Cooperator Survey

The rabbit survey was developed in 1995 as a voluntary initiative. Hunters are asked to record data including date of hunt, county hunted, hours hunted, number of hunters, number of dogs, and number of eastern cottontail, swamp, and Appalachian cottontail (seen, killed, and wounded), on a diary-type hunting log. Logs are available on the internet: <http://fw.ky.gov/Hunt/Pages/Game-Species.aspx> or by calling 1-800-858-1549. Hunters simply keep the log up-to-date as the hunting season progresses, and mail it to the KDFWR Headquarters when they are finished hunting for the season. Data collected from the survey give the KDFWR information that can be used to monitor rabbit population trends in Kentucky and better serve the hunters of the state. Each year participating hunter

cooperators are mailed a new hunting log, the results of the survey, and a small gift. Hunters who wish to receive a copy of their log from the previous year may call 502-892-4521 or [cody.rhoden@ky.gov](mailto:cody.rhoden@ky.gov).

### Hunter Log Survey

The rabbit population in Kentucky appears to ebb and flow in roughly 7-year cycles. The hunting season of 2022 was near the peak of the trend (Figure 2). We would expect the trend to begin to slightly decline as we near the end of a cycle.

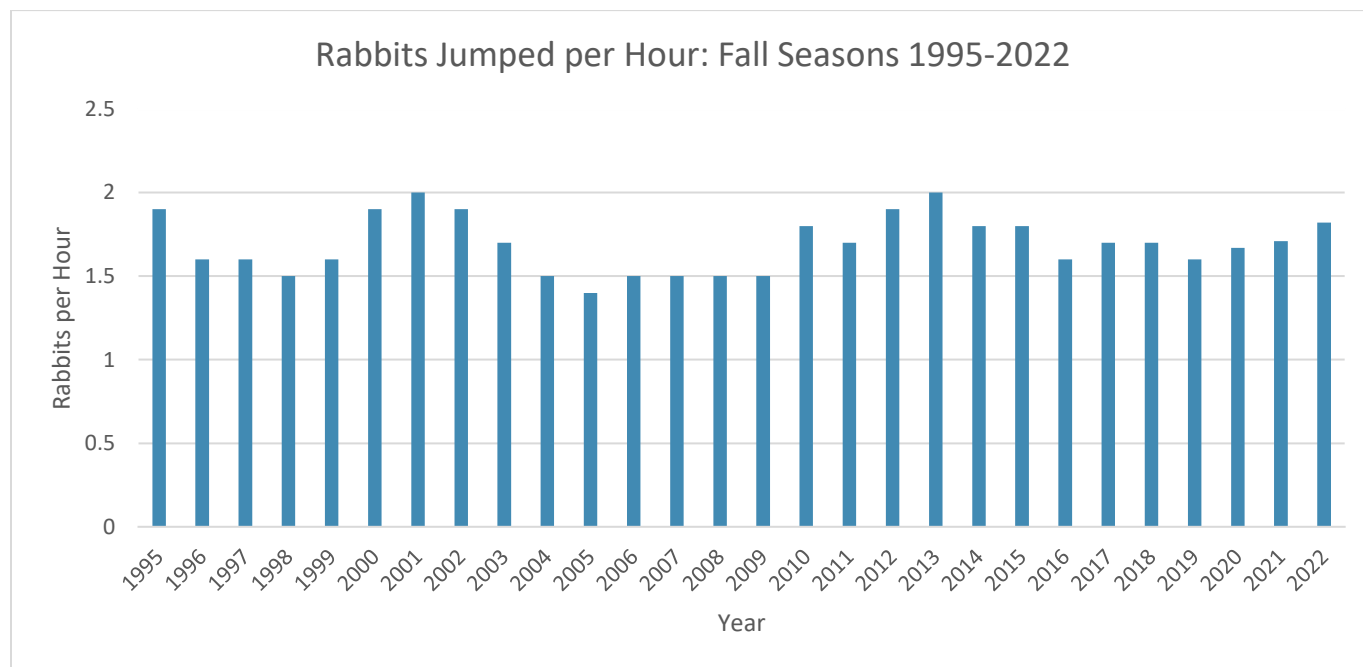


Figure 2. Average number of rabbits jumped per hour by hunters who returned hunting logs following the fall season from 1995 through 2022.

### Past Rabbit Hunter Cooperator Surveys

Participation has been decreasing over the last several years, with a 21% decrease in the 2022 hunting season (Table 2a). Please take a look at the below map (Figure 3). If you hunt in any of the light blue counties, please consider filling out a hunting log this year (even if you do not harvest any game). Once again, do not forget to mail in your log and encourage other rabbit hunters to do the same. Why not take someone new hunting this year? The future of hunting depends on it!

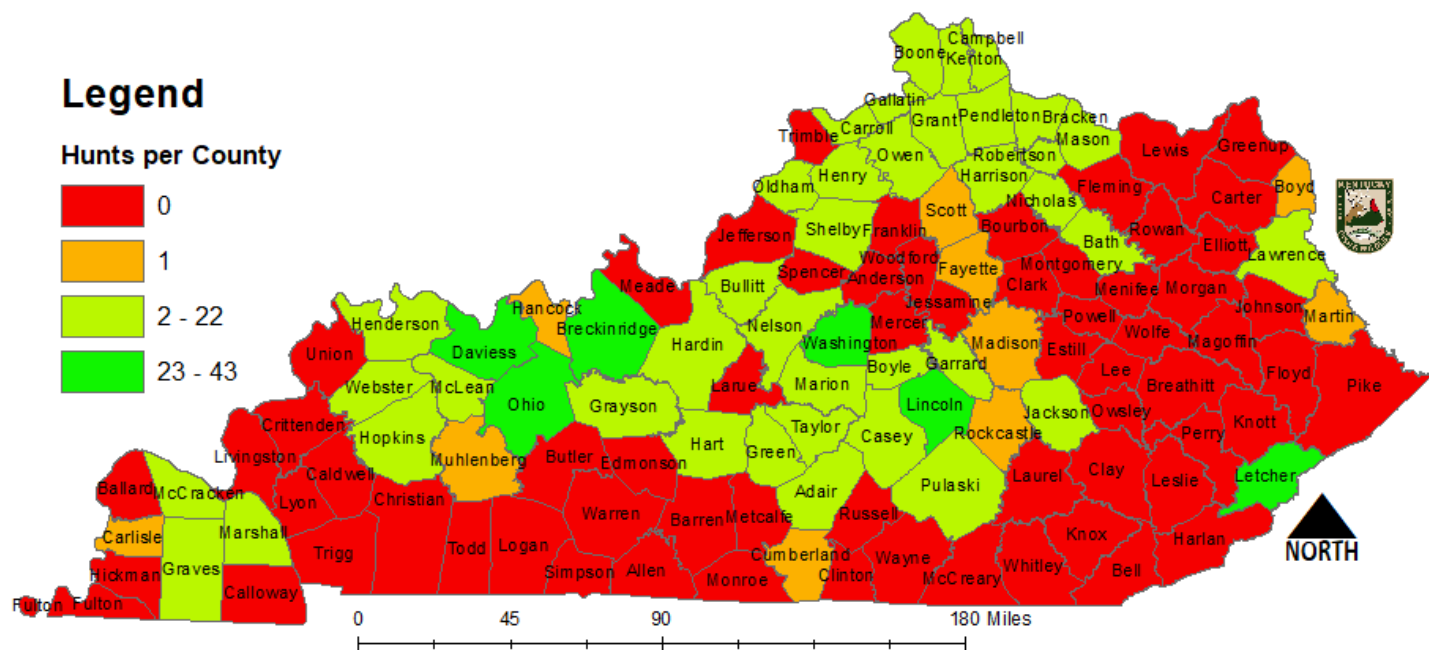


Figure 3: Hunter cooperator logs reporting hunts from each county in Kentucky in the 2022 season. Cooler colors equal more hunts and warmer colors equal less hunts per county.

Table 2a: Hunting statistics from past hunter cooperator surveys in Kentucky from the 2017 hunting season to present.

<b>Statistics</b>	<b>2017-18</b>	<b>2018-19</b>	<b>2019-20</b>	<b>2020-21</b>	<b>2021-22</b>	<b>2022-23</b>
Cooperators	56	50	54	44	42	33
Hunts	861	790	793	770	645	495
Counties	65	65	57	55	42	55
Hunts/Hunter	15	12	15	18	15	15
Hours Hunted	2,869	2,653	2,753	2,758	2,267	1,890
Dogs Used	3,579	3,305	3,369	3,173	2,885	2,260
Total Rabbits Jumped	4,878	4,397	4,518	4,576	3,881	3,288
Total Rabbits Harvested	1,902	1,911	1,868	2,006	1,585	1,288
Total Rabbits Wounded	74	74	52	80	52	41
Hunting Mortality (%)	41	45	43	46	42	40

Table 2b. Breakdown of species harvested in recent hunting seasons. \*Note: One Appalachian reported killed in 2018-19. One Appalachian cottontail jumped and one killed in 2019-20.

<i>Statistics</i>	E. Cottontail			Swamp		
	Jumped	Killed	Wounded	Jumped	Killed	Wounded
<b>2018-19*</b>	4201	1754	74	196	83	0
<b>2019-20*</b>	4488	1855	50	29	12	2
<b>2020-21</b>	4532	1994	79	44	12	1
<b>2021-22</b>	3830	1573	52	47	12	0
<b>2022-23</b>	3251	1280	40	37	8	1

## 2022-23 Hunter Cooperator Results

Logs were received from 33 rabbit hunters this last hunting season (a 21% decrease from last year, Table 2a). Hunters averaged 15 hunting trips throughout the season. Ninety-nine percent of rabbit hunters used dogs in their pursuit. Data were provided from 495 hunts, from 55 counties, with good distribution across the Commonwealth (Figure 3). Hunters jumped an average of 7 rabbits per **hunt** and an average of 2 rabbits per **hour**.

### *Harvest Statistics 2022-23*

Hunters jumped an average of 6.64 rabbits per **hunt** and harvested 2.60 rabbits per **hunt**. Hunters jumped an average of 1.74 rabbits per **hour** hunted and harvested 0.68 rabbits per **hour** hunted. The number of rabbits **jumped** per hour stayed consistent all season with a slight downward trend as the season progressed (Figure 4). The number of rabbits **harvested** per hour was also consistent throughout the hunting season, with a slight downturn late in the season (Figure 3). Hunters harvested 39% of rabbits jumped and wounded 1% (Table 2). Assuming wounded rabbits did not survive, the hunting mortality rate was 40% of rabbits jumped in 2022-23.

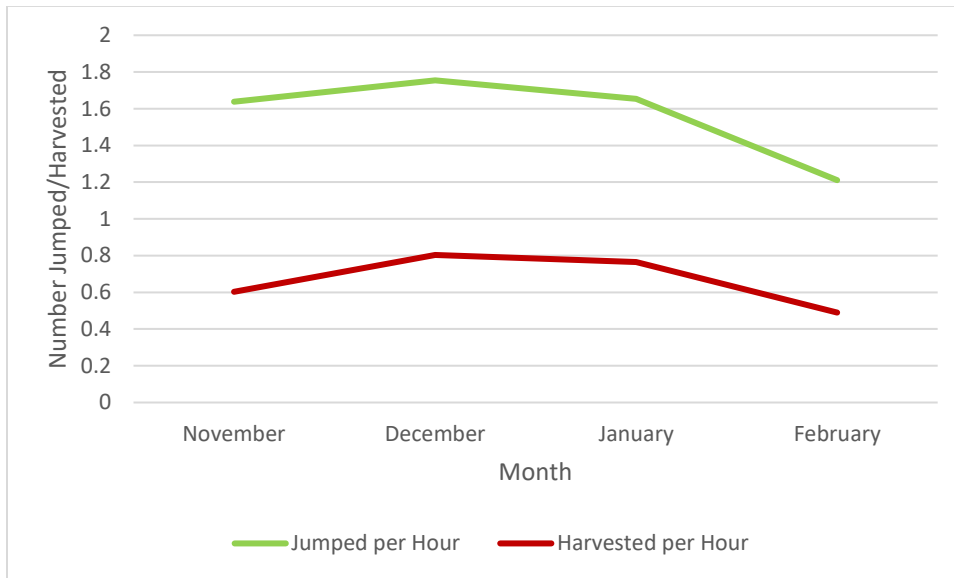


Figure 4. Rabbits jumped and harvested per hour by month in the 2022 season. Data are based on reports from hunting logs returned following the 2022 season.

### ***Hunter Effort***

Hunting effort peaked in late December (Figure 5). The majority (37%) of all hunts took place in the month of December. February saw very few hunts relative to the earlier months of the season.

The hunter effort index reveals two peaks, one in late December and one in January. The hunting effort (blue trend line; Figure 5) decreases as the season progresses. This is interesting, as in past hunting season the effort and harvest shows an increasing trend as the season progresses.



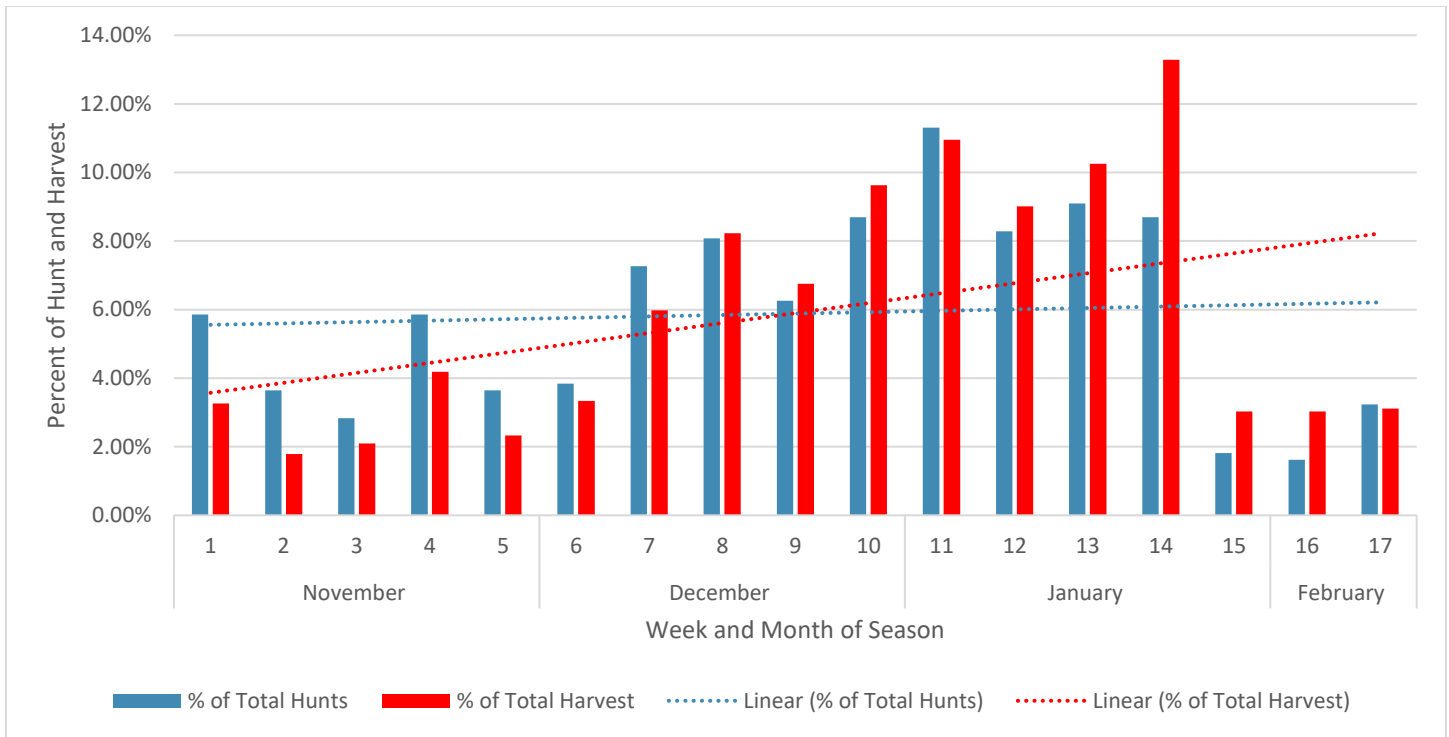


Figure 5. Percent of hunts and harvest broken down by week and month of the 2022 season. Hunter effort peaked in the first full week of January, while hunter success peaked in the second to last full week of January. Generally, hunter effort was consistent as the season progressed, but hunter success showed an increase as the season progressed.

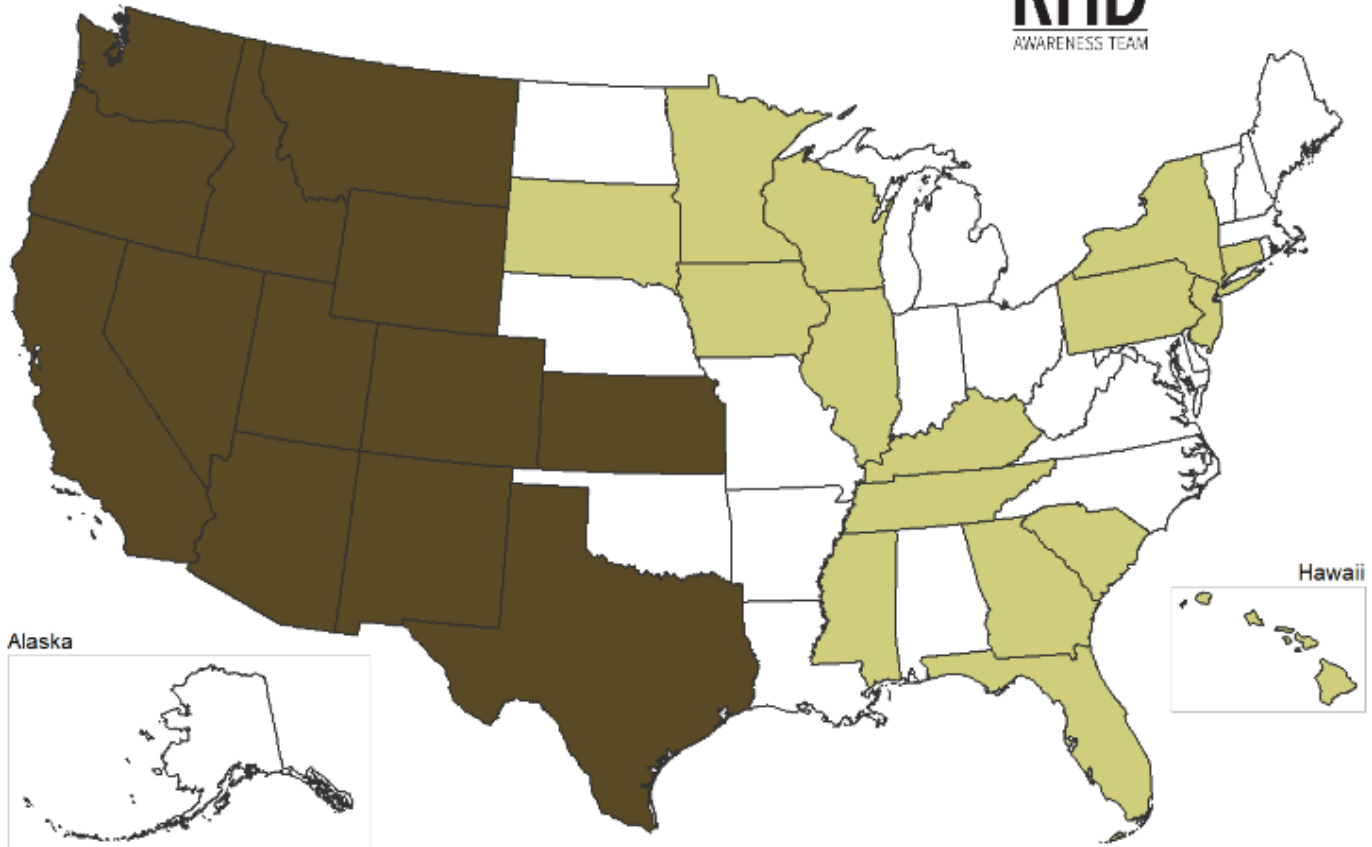
## Disease Surveillance

The KDFWR handles disease outbreaks for wildlife across the Commonwealth. There are currently no widespread disease issues for rabbits in the state. Disease is a natural component of all healthy ecosystems. Generally speaking, disease is not considered an important driver of rabbit population fluctuations. An emerging disease threat that could potentially affect rabbits in Kentucky is the highly contagious and fatal rabbit hemorrhagic disease, known as RHDV2.

RHDV2 is caused by a virus in the same family as Norovirus (which is the causative agent for half of all food poisoning sickness in the United States), however humans **cannot** contract RHDV2 and it is fatal in rabbit populations. RHDV2 likely originated in Europe and has been a known disease agent in domestic rabbits for many years. Until 2020, RHDV2 was not known to infect or cause illness in native rabbits in North America. However, it has been documented in multiple southeastern states including a domestic rabbit in Kentucky (Jefferson county; image below). RHDV2 is transmitted by direct contact with infected rabbits, both live and dead animals. RHDV2 is also a swift killer, and often little to no symptoms are observed before sudden death. On some occasions, dead rabbits may have a bloody nose.

KDFWR has responded to this outbreak with the passage of an emergency regulation limiting the movement of rabbits and their parts into the state.

RHDV2  
August 2023



■ Domestic Cases ■ Wild Cases ■ Domestic & Wild Cases

Data provided by USDA APHIS. Supplemental data reports (e.g., Press Releases) have been collated by Rabbits Rescue Society and WildRescue Inc. since the last USDA reporting period (every 3 months).

See [RHDV2.org/resources](https://www.rhdv2.org/resources) for USDA data disclaimer.  
Domestic cases include both domestic and feral rabbit cases.  
Map Credit: Dr. Michel Kohl, RHD Awareness Team, University of Georgia.  
Data last updated August 1 2023

The Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources encourages hunters who encounter wildlife acting strangely or that look sick to contact Cody Rhoden, [cody.rhoden@ky.gov](mailto:cody.rhoden@ky.gov); 502-892-4521.

## General Information about the 2023-24 Season

### License and Permit Fees

License	Resident	Nonresident
Annual Hunting License	\$27	\$140
Senior/Disabled License	\$12	N/A
Sportsman’s License	\$95	N/A
Youth Sportsman’s License	\$30	N/A
Annual Trapping License	\$20	\$130
Annual Youth Trapping	\$5	N/A

### Season Dates and Bag Limits

Season		Statewide Season Dates 2023-2024	Statewide Bag Limit
Fall Season	Eastern Zone	November 1-10 and November 13 – January 31	4
	Western Zone	November 13 – February 10	
Trapping Season	Eastern Zone	November 13 – January 31	4
	Western Zone	November 13 – February 10	

**Continuing this year:** Three WMAs will require rabbit hunters to check in/out using a Kiosk and vehicle HangTag system. Please see below or check the Hunting Guide for more information.

WMA	Tract	Season Dates	Required Check In/Out
Peabody	Sinclair	November 13 – February 10	Yes
	Ken	November 13 – February 10	
Clay	All Tracts	November 1 – December 31 (Closed Nov. 4-5 and Dec. 1-4)	Yes
Rockcastle River	All Tracts	November 1 – December 31	Yes

## Outlook for the 2023-2024 Rabbit Season

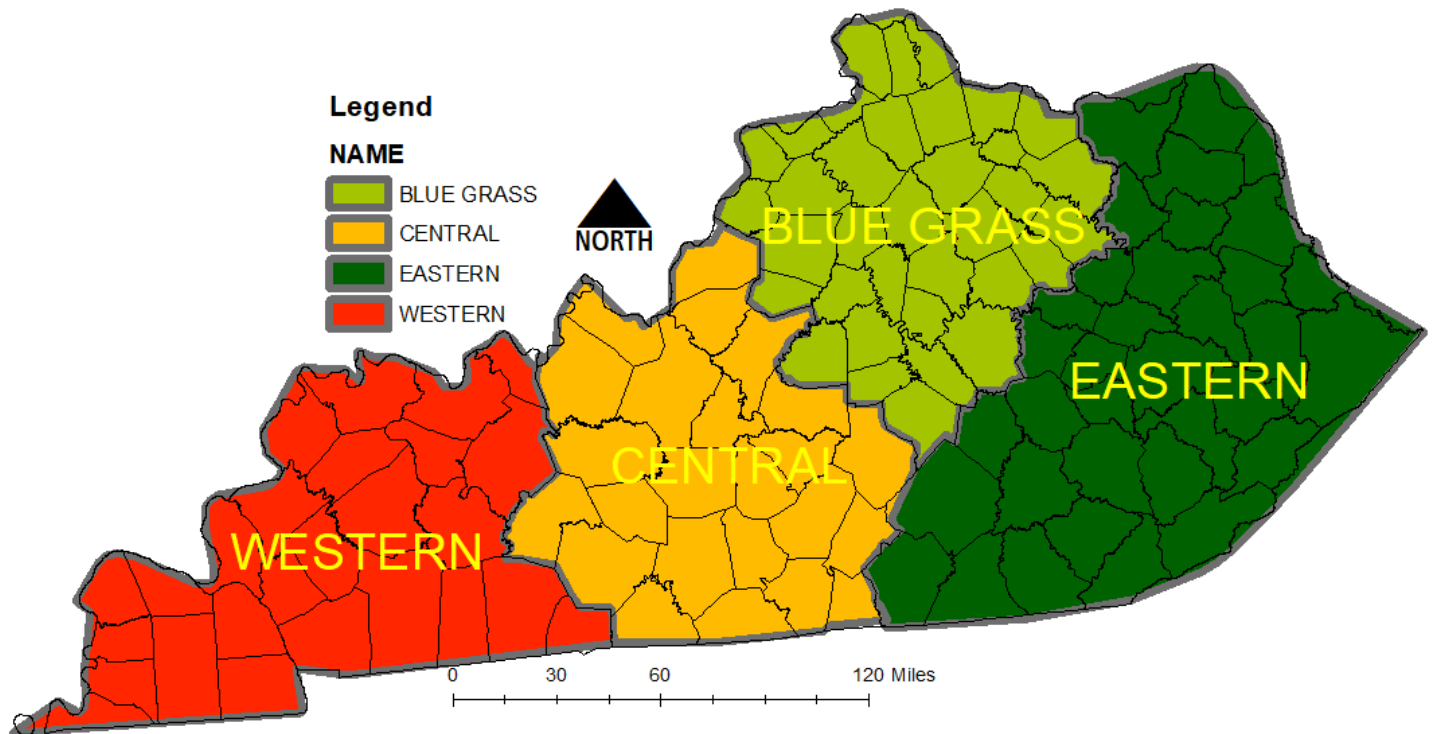
The Mail Carrier Survey and the Rabbit Hunter Log Survey appear to be tracking each other well. Therefore, we can make predictions based on the Mail Carrier Survey results. This year, the East Region of the state once again led all regions in the number of rabbits observed, followed by the Bluegrass Region. Both of these regions saw an increase from observations in 2022.

Overall, the 2022-23 rabbit season was good. Over the last 22 years, the population has remained fairly stable with bumps up and down. Last year, harvest and jump rates were slightly increased when compared to the previous season. The Mail Carrier Survey shows a very slight decrease in the number of observed rabbits statewide from 2022 to 2023 (6%). This result should lead to very similar jump and harvest rates for rabbits in Kentucky for the 2023-2024 season. Hunters in the Commonwealth should expect a great year for rabbit hunting in the upcoming season.

Don't forget to turn in your Hunter Cooperator log at the completion of this year's hunt. Logs should be returned no later than March 31, 2024. In return, we will send you a report and a small gift as a token of our appreciation.

Encourage all of your friends to log their hunts as well. Have a safe and enjoyable rabbit season and thanks again for your support! And don't forget to take someone new to hunting out with you this year.


### Appendix 1 Region Breakdown



## Contacts

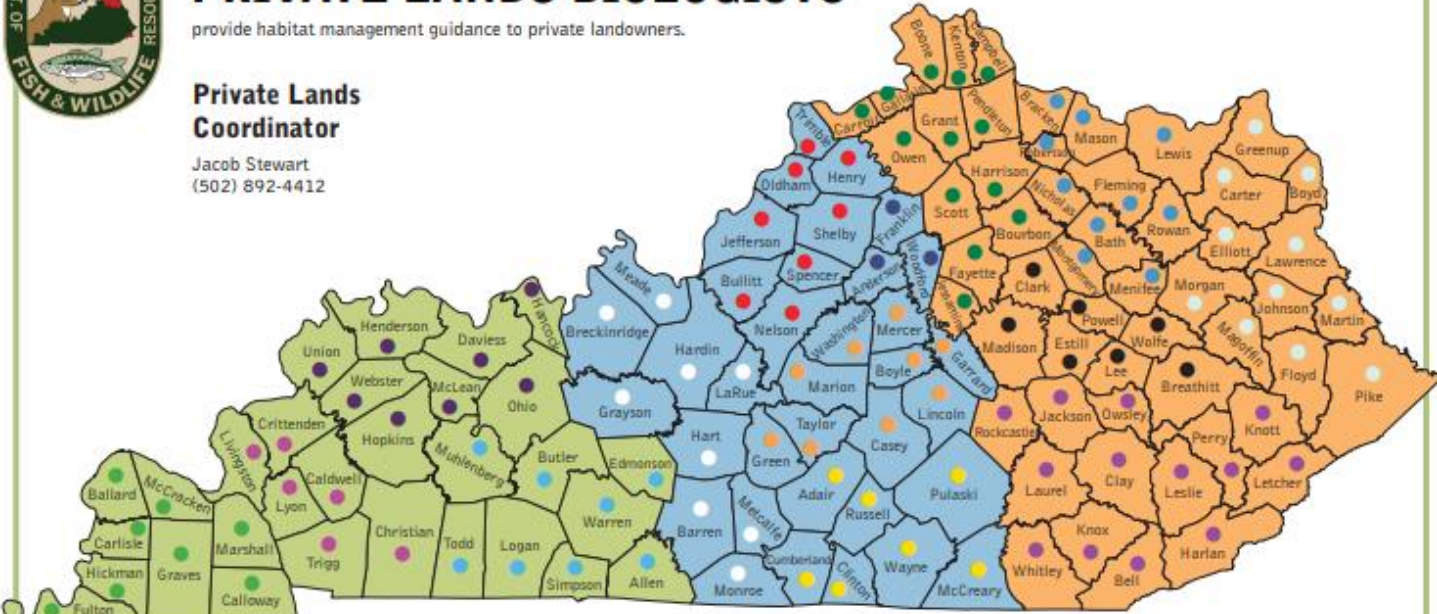
Approximately 93% of Kentucky is privately owned. To successfully manage our wildlife resources, the KDFWR works cooperatively with Kentucky’s private landowners. One of the essential ingredients in conserving Kentucky’s wildlife resources is habitat improvement. Wildlife biologists are available to work with interested individuals or groups on properties that they own or have management rights on.

Refer to the map below to contact your local wildlife biologist for assistance with wildlife management on your property.



**PRIVATE LANDS BIOLOGISTS**  
provide habitat management guidance to private landowners.

**Private Lands Coordinator**  
Jacob Stewart  
(502) 892-4412



**AREA 1**


<b>Biologists</b>	<b>NRCS Liaison</b>
● Jason Beirman (270) 705-7483	Tyler Reagan (270) 843-1112
● Zach Stevens (270) 484-2732	<b>WRE Biologist</b>
● Zach Coy (270) 936-6331	Jill Kimmel, Madisonville (270) 339-0024
● Riley Dollenbacher (270) 356-6377	

**AREA 2**

<b>Biologists</b>	<b>NRCS Liaison</b>
● vacant (502) 871-0490	● Elizabeth Johnson (502) 229-0259
● Cody Jarrett (270) 283-2826	
● Jon Anderson (606) 219-7825	
○ Caleb Miller (270) 58	

**AREA 3**

<b>Biologists</b>	<b>NRCS Liaison</b>
● vacant (606) 224-5739	● Randall Alcorn (606) 224-5739
● Andrew Whitaker (502) 892-8822	
○ Harley Weaver (606) 207-6423	
● Daniel Skinner (606) 224-5822	



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The Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources is funded through the sale of hunting and fishing licenses. It receives no general fund tax dollars.