

Illinois hunters are blessed with plenty of rabbit hunting options

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Illinois hunters are blessed with plenty of rabbit hunting opportunities. Though some of the better hunting is found locally, rabbits can also be found in good numbers virtually anywhere quality habitat exists.

As with most wildlife species, habitat is the key to finding quality rabbit hunting. The fact remains that if you've got good habitat, you'll find rabbits.

Traditionally, the area from Interstate 70 to just north of the Shawnee Hills offers some of the state's finest rabbit hunting. Counties bordering the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers are also top areas for cottontails.

According to wildlife biologists, Bond, Calhoun, Clay, Clinton and Madison counties are among the top central Illinois rabbit locations. In the south, Richland, Fayette, Wayne, Marion and Jefferson counties would be included among the top choices.

Reproduction is no problem for the prolific cottontail. They quickly multiply in areas containing quality habitat.

According to experts, rabbits have multiple litters and can breed at an age of only a few months. A female surviving the summer can produce more than 20 young.

Actually, it is disease and predation that keeps the rabbit numbers in check. Virtually every predator including free-running dogs and common house cats prey on rabbits.

Still, there always seems to be an ample supply of Southern Illinois cottontails each year. And, hunting them is where the fun begins.

Most veteran hunters wouldn't consider pursuing rabbits without beagles. They say the ruckus raised by a pack of trailing beagle hounds is half the excitement in rabbit hunting.

Then, all you need to do is find a spot that offers a good view of the area you are hunting. The dogs will jump the rabbit and usually bring it back if it eludes you the first time.

Most rabbit hunters prefer to use plenty of dog power during a rabbit hunt. They say two or more beagles usually speed up the hunt.

In fact, they are less likely to lose the scent trail when there is more than one dog chasing the rabbit. The typical hunter has found three dogs to be nearly ideal for an afternoon rabbit hunt.

Though a few beagles definitely add to the pleasure of the rabbit hunting experience, they are not a necessity. Undoubtedly, most rabbit hunting is done without the assistance of dogs.

However, this places more of the brush-busting burden on the hunter. Dogless hunters need to be willing to search the briars, thick grass and brush for cottontails. Rabbits often refuse to budge from their hiding place until a boot comes in contact with their derriere.

Ideally, one hunter will take on the duties of the dog stomping on brush piles and plowing through tall weeds. The remaining hunters position themselves where they can easily spot any rabbits exiting the area.

Weather conditions play a major role in rabbit hunting. On warm days, cottontails can be found feeding in the grassy areas. Colder weather, however, sends them to brushy areas near grain fields.

On bitterly cold and windy days, rabbits hole up or can sometimes be found in protected areas like hillsides, gullies and ditches. Look for locations that will offer some protection from the wind and temperatures.

A fresh snowfall can make a fleeing rabbit easier to see. Any movement against the white background can be easily spotted by an experienced hunter.

While countless rabbits are taken each year by hunters using 12-gauge, most serious rabbit hunters prefer to use a 20-gauge shotgun with a full choke. Shotshell preferences vary even more widely among hunters.

Though many prefer to use shotshells containing the larger No. 4 shot, No. 6 shot is likely the most common. Many hunters often use a shell containing an ounce of No. 6 shot followed with a heavier load in case a second shot is required.

Finding good rabbit hunting land is not as hard as you might first think. Often, all that's required is a little pre-season leg work. Many times, landowners are more receptive to hunters when approached prior to the hunting season.

Show up at their door with a bunch of your buddies on the day you expect to hunt and you're likely to be disappointed. Keep your hunting groups small and always offer to share some of the game.

Landowners also appreciate the opportunity to join in on the hunt. You might be surprised to learn they often have little opportunity to participate in recreational activities like hunting.

The rabbit hunting season opens statewide on Nov. 4 and closes Feb. 15. Bag limits are four rabbits daily with 10 in possession after the third day of the season. Hunting hours are sunrise to sunset.