

Ten Tips for Taking Winter Rabbits

As the winter grows colder and cover and food sources become harder to find, rabbits change their habits. These tips will ensure your late-season success.

By Ed Harp



Photo by Ron Sinfelt

Of course, it's always a thrill to hunt on opening day. After all, it's been nearly a year since the opportunity to harvest a few rabbits has presented itself. Don't forget, however, that late season can be just as good. All you need to do is adjust your thinking a little bit.

Come January, life is not easy for an eastern cottontail. They have spent the fall, and most of the winter, just trying to survive. They have been hunted by everything ranging from house cats to bobcats on the ground, and by hawks, owls and other feathered predators from the air.

Cover has gotten a little scarce, making survival even harder. Despite rabbits' quickness and extraordinary ability to sense danger, thinner cover gives a split-second advantage to the predators. That's all they need.

On top of all that, the food supply has dwindled. The lush vegetation of spring, summer and fall is now gone. Most of the clover, tender young plants, berries and vegetables have been eaten. What is left over is getting brown, tough, tasteless and hard to find.

Still, rabbit populations as a whole are designed to thrive under these conditions. Spring is just around the corner. Like most species, rabbits will soon turn their thoughts toward reproduction. Mating begins, in most areas of the country, in early February. It will continue through October. Gestation takes from 28 to 32 days with an average litter size of four or five babies. Some rabbits breed again within hours of giving birth.

With these things in mind, three top rabbit hunters and beagle breeders were consulted to see how they approach late-season rabbit hunting.

Robert Oliver, president of the United Beagle Gundog Federation (www.ubgf.org), Tony Chastain and Phil Kirby know as much about rabbit habits and habitat as anybody alive. All three spend their time breeding, training and running beagles. They do this day in and day out, no matter the weather or the season.

They also hunt rabbits, mostly later in the season after the deer hunters have vacated the woods. Combined, they have more than 100 years of experience with cottontails.

Oliver, Chastain and Kirby offer the following 10 tips for taking late-season rabbits. The first four deal with forage. The next four deal with habitat. The last two suggest techniques.

To take full advantage of their knowledge, combine at least one tip from the forage group with at least one tip from the habitat group, matching the conditions on the land you hunt with the most appropriate tips. This should put you on a few bunnies. After that, you'll be in a position to try one of their techniques.

Tip Number One: Find The Clover

The importance of clover cannot be overstated. Cottontails love it. It is their first choice for dinner whenever it is available. If there's a patch of clover around, the rabbits won't be far away.

To find clover during the winter, it is necessary to know something about it. For those hunters who do not know what it looks like, check the Internet.

Clover is a legume. That means it deposits nitrogen in the soil as it grows. This makes for leafy, green vegetative growth around it. High nitrogen content in the soil also helps the vegetation stay green a little longer during the winter.

Clover can usually be found in loose, sandy or well-drained soils. It grows best in areas with a lot of sunshine. Look for it in old pastures or in areas adjacent to them. (Many of our public hunting lands were once farmed.)

Of course, it is sometimes planted in food plots by deer or turkey hunters, and if the plot backs up to cover, big game won't be the only animals interested in the food.

In places, clover will grow wild. Wild patches are usually small and scattered, so finding them will take some time. It's time well spent, however.

Tip Number Two: Find The Blackberry And Raspberry Bushes

Blackberry and raspberry bushes offer both food and protection. There are several hundred varieties of them. They all grow wild. Their young, tender shoots offer an excellent and tasty food source for rabbits during the warm-weather months of the year.

As it turns cold some of those shoots – the ones down deep in the tangle near the ground – will remain green all winter. They offer a readily available food source.

Their tangles also provide some of the best cover available for rabbits. Hunters and other predators may find thick patches of berries nearly impossible to get through. Not so with rabbits. They easily make paths through them. Some live their entire lives in and around these patches.

Berries also provide protection from above. It's difficult, indeed nearly impossible, to see a rabbit from above such a mess.

Look for blackberries and raspberries growing wild along old fencerows, on hillsides, near old campsites, around old dump grounds and in old, long neglected fields.

Hunt such areas carefully. The rabbits won't be far away.

Tip Number Three: Find The Saplings

Saplings, especially those in large stands of a half an acre or more, will nearly always hold a few late-winter rabbits.

As winter wears on, clover and berry patches are harder and harder to find. This forces rabbits to look for something different to eat. The alternative is starvation.

Rabbits are especially fond of young deciduous trees. Many varieties of these trees grow rapidly, up to a couple of feet per year, so small yearling saplings are often available. They may stop growing in the winter, but they don't die. Under that dry, dead-looking bark is a little green.

Look for evidence of cottontail activity by inspecting the trunk of the sapling. If rabbits are in the area, you'll know soon enough. The bark of the sapling will be chewed off, in a circle, around the tree. What's left will look like the cob from an ear of sweet corn after Sunday dinner.

When forage is scarce it is not unusual to find scores of these saplings eaten down to the woody meat of the trunk. Not a single one will be spared.

Tip Number Four: Find The Deer Food Plots

According to our experts, a rabbit will eat anything a deer will eat. It's just that simple. So, if you can find where the deer are feeding, you can usually find a few bunnies.

Although we mentioned clover in food plots early, that's not the only plant that will interest a rabbit.

The obvious first choice is a deer food plot. In some public areas, they are planted by the state DNR. In others, they are planted privately in cooperation with the state agency. In still other areas, you can find food plots on private land alongside the public land you are hunting.

Some states lease public land to local farmers. They are allowed to grow crops so long as a portion of those crops is left standing in the field for game forage. Rabbits will feed around these places long after the deer have stopped. The crumbs and small pieces of debris that deer have no interest in will sustain a cottontail for a long time.

Savvy rabbit hunters work around these areas with care. It may not look like much to a human, but it is survival to a rabbit.

Tip Number Five: Find The Fencerows

Fencerows just naturally attract rabbits. The reasons for this are varied and beyond the scope of this article. No matter the reasons, however, fencerows are one of the most reliable places to jump rabbits.

Much of our public land was once owned by private individuals. Before the days of large mechanized cropping equipment, it was common for farmers to chop their land into small fields. The fields were almost always fenced. Some farmers used fence posts, but many simply nailed the fence fabric to the nearest tree.

Long neglected, these fencerows are overgrown with trees, briars, brush and brambles. In most cases they are nearly a solid mass of undergrowth. This is a natural hiding place for cottontail rabbits.

Our experts suggest that hunters work along these old fencerows carefully and precisely. Stomp repeatedly on the wire. Shake everything you can. Walk both sides of the fencerow from both directions.

The rabbits will, at times, sit very tight along their lengths. If you are shooting on the jump, be aware that the rabbits will nearly always run parallel to the fence. Plan your shots accordingly.

Tip Number Six: Find The Brushpiles

Back a few years ago when energy prices were soaring, heating with wood was all the rage. Nearly everyone had a wood stove, a chain saw and an old pickup truck.

Much land, both public and private, was used for cutting firewood. In many locales the tops of the trees were piled up as the firewood was cut.

These brushpiles make nearly perfect homes for rabbits. Over time, the brushpiles drop and become overgrown with weeds, briars and all manner of vegetation. This offers the quick and nimble rabbits protection from foxes, cats, dogs and other four-legged predators. They also offer protection from hawks, owls and numerous other predators that hunt from above.

Our experts suggest that hunters wanting to be successful in the late season never pass by one of these brushpiles. They take a lot of work to properly hunt. Nevertheless, it is worth the effort.

In some cases you will need to climb on top of them and jump up and down to make the rabbit move. (Editor's Note: this is yet another reason to take young people hunting.) Keep a sharp eye out for the rabbit. He may try to escape from any direction – almost always the one behind you.

Cut stumps also attract rabbits. They typically sprout after they are cut and offer bunnies something to eat, especially when a winter chill is in the air.

Tip Number Seven: Find TheHoneysuckle And TheMultiflora Rose

Honeysuckle is a dense, sweet-smelling plant that grows quite thick and offers winter bunnies a little something to hide under. There are countless varieties. Most are vines; some are shrubs. A few are combinations of the two.

Multiflora rose is a very dense, green shrub that was first introduced into the United States as an erosion control measure by the U.S. Soil Conservation Service back in the 1930s. Its planting was encouraged to control erosion and to offer wind and snow breaks. It will do all of those things and more.

It grows to a height of 15 feet under ideal conditions and can grow so thick that it takes a large bulldozer to move through it. Bunnies like it because it does what you might expect: offer protection from above and below. The young, tender sprouts offer forage in a pinch. What could be better for our nimble quarry, the eastern cottontail?

Both honeysuckle and multiflora rose can be difficult to hunt. Because it is a vine, honeysuckle will grab at your legs as you walk through it. Multiflora rose can be impossible to walk through, especially in large patches of a quarter-acre or more. Not only is it thick, but it also has extremely sharp thorns to boot.

Yet, they are both worth the effort. Late-season rabbits will be found in them.

And, because honeysuckle and multiflora rose are so difficult to work, many hunters will pass them by for easier habitat. That offers fresh territory for those hunters tough enough to hunt in either. Fresh territory is hard to find in late season. Smart hunters do not pass it by, not if they want rabbits.

Tip Number Eight: Find TheCedar Trees

At first glance, cedar trees may not look like much to a rabbit hunter. Under some conditions, however, they can be the place to be for fast action.

They are at their best during cold and wet weather or under extremely windy conditions. It may be that the bunnies use them as umbrellas and windbreaks or for some other reason they have yet to share with us. Why doesn't matter, only where.

The best ones are big, thick and have boughs that drop all the way to the ground. Lift the limbs up and roust the rabbits that are hiding under the tree. Shake the limbs, yell and beat on the tree with a stick. Do whatever it takes to jump the rabbit.

Put your gun down before you attempt this. Let your partner have the shot or wait for the beagles to bring the rabbit back to you.

Tip Number Nine:When It Is Cold, Slow Down

Cold is a relative concept. The best way to analyze it from the rabbit's perspective is to consider temperature not in absolute terms but in relative terms. If there has been a temperature drop of 20 or 30 degrees over the last 24 hours in late winter, it is cold.

The ambient air temperature is of no consequence. The air feels cold to the rabbit and that is what counts.

When it gets cold, the bunnies tend to sit tight and won't move unless forced to do so. It is common for them to sit so tight that hunters moving along at a pretty good clip will walk right over the top of them. The rabbit never moves. He sits there while you go on your merry way complaining about the lack of game.

At other times, he will stay put until you are in front of him and then sneak out the back door. You'll never know he was there.

To avoid this, slow down. Take one step at a time. Pause between steps. The slower you move, the better. If the brush is heavy, carry a stick and beat on top of it as you walk along. Make as much noise as possible.

Even at this slow pace, pay attention to what's going on behind you.

Tip Number 10: Use Beagles If You Can

Beagles are especially useful in cool or cold weather. For starters, the weather becomes their friend. Unlike summer, the heat and pollen are not adverse factors when they run a rabbit in late winter.

They also seem to be able to smell better in the cold. Maybe it sharpens their senses, maybe it's the lack of other smells or maybe it's because of things humans do not understand. It happens. That's what we need to know.

If you use beagles, keep a few things in mind, however. Winter rabbits do not run in the same kind of loops that spring and summer rabbits do.

The does tend to shorten up their loops and will typically return very close to where they were jumped. Buck rabbits, on the other hand, will run in much larger loops during the late winter and do not always return to the place of the jump.

Some hunters think this is due to them being chased all winter long by predators. Others think it comes from the rut. Either way it happens. Savvy hunters keep it in mind. Soon after the chase is on, try to make a determination as to how the bunny is running. Then select your stand accordingly.

Follow these tips and your late-season rabbit harvest will increase, dramatically.

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