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**1999-2000 Illinois Rabbit Hunter Survey**

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STUDY 101  
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**JOB COMPLETION REPORT  
HUNTER HARVEST AND  
HUMAN DIMENSIONS RESEARCH PROGRAM  
STATE OF ILLINOIS**

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## **1999-2000 Illinois Rabbit Hunter Survey**

### **Objective**

To survey 1 group of upland game (rabbit, pheasant, quail, dove, or other) hunters annually to determine their activities, harvest, characteristics, attitudes, and opinions in Illinois.

### **Methods**

A random sample of 3,000 hunters was selected from purchasers of Illinois Resident Hunting Licenses and Habitat Stamps. Hunters were mailed a questionnaire addressing hunter activities and harvest for the 1999 license year, as well as specific attitudes toward rabbit hunting in Illinois. The questionnaire was followed 14 days later with a postcard reminder to nonrespondents. Hunters not responding to either the first mailing or postcard were sent a second questionnaire 14 days after the postcard reminder. Nonrespondents to the second questionnaire were sent a second postcard reminder 14 days following the second questionnaire.

### **Results**

Of the sample of 3,000 hunters, 2,853 questionnaires were deliverable. A total of 1,808 hunters (63%) responded to the survey. Approximately one-third (32%) of hunters hunted rabbits during the 1999 license year (1999-2000 seasons). Of those hunters who hunted rabbits, 67% went a field specifically for rabbits. Dogs were used by 35% of rabbit hunters in Illinois.

A large majority (86%) of hunters felt that rabbit populations were lower in 1999 than in the 5 years prior to the survey. Most hunters (63%) believed predators were responsible for this decline, less than half that many (27%) felt cover was the problem,

whereas few (3%) felt that too many hunters were to blame. A small number (1%) felt weather, primarily bad winters, was responsible for the decline in population.

Hunters varied as to when they hunted rabbits. Most rabbit hunters (54%) reported that most of their hunting took place between November 25 and December 15. Fewer hunters (27%) stated most of their rabbit hunting occurred after December 15, and (19%) responded that most hunting was before November 25. Rabbit hunters were most often accompanied by friends (44%) while hunting, followed by family (42%), and 12% stated they usually hunted alone.

Of all hunters in our sample, 83% agreed that predator control was required to have good small game hunting. Most hunters (84%) agreed that loss of habitat was the most serious threat to small game populations, and 82% agreed that more effort should be made to improve habitat on private lands. Fewer hunters (71%) believed that changes in farming practices were responsible for declines in small game populations.

## **Discussion**

Rabbit hunting is still enjoyed by a substantial segment of Illinois hunters. Hunters were in strong agreement that rabbit populations have declined in the past 5 years. It may be that more hunters felt that the declines were more pronounced over a longer period and that population declines have leveled somewhat in the past 5 years. As such, more hunters may believe that populations were lower at the time of the survey than 10 or 20 years prior.

Hunters seem to have failed to make a connection between lack of cover and predation or bad weather as factors leading to declining rabbit populations. Hunters also felt strongly about predator control to establish good small game hunting. Related to these responses were attitudes agreeing with the need for habitat improvement on private lands. Yet hunters were not as strongly in agreement that changes in agricultural practices were a cause for decreased small game habitat. These responses suggest hunters may not adequately understand the components of quality habitat and the benefits quality habitat provides in terms of protection from predators and poor weather. Hunters

may not equate clean farming practices with declining small game populations, or may be reluctant to agree due to the important position agriculture holds in Illinois.

Table 1. Did you hunt rabbits during the 1999-2000 season?  
(n=1,740)

	Percent Response
Yes	32%
No	68%

Table 2. If you hunted rabbits how did you hunt them **most often**?  
(n=545)

	Percent Response
Incidental to other species (such as pheasants or quail)	33%
As the main species of the hunt	67%

Table 3. Do you use dogs specially trained for rabbit hunting (for example beagles)?  
(n=536)

	Percent Response
Yes	35%
No	65%

Table 4. In your opinion, how have small game populations changed in the past 5 years?  
(n=546)

Change	Percent Response
Lower	86%
Same	5%
Higher	4%
Not sure	5%

Table 5. If you answered "Lower", what do you feel is the single greatest reason for the decline in small game populations?  
(n=570)

Reason for Decline	Percent Response
Too many predators (hawks, owls, foxes, coyotes)	63%
Poor cover	27%
Too many hunters	3%
Bad winters	1%
Other (see appendix A)	6%

Table 6. In what part of the small game season did most of your hunting take place?  
(n=558)

	Percent Response
Between November 25 and December 15	54%
After December 15	27%
Before November 25	19%

Table 7. Which of the following best describes those who usually accompany you small game hunting?  
(n=611)

	Percent Response
Friends	44%
Family	42%
I usually hunt alone	12%
Neighbors	1%
Coworkers	1%
Other <sup>a</sup>	<1%

<sup>a</sup>Hunting club members

Table 8. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements about small game hunting in Illinois.  
(n=1,808)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
To have good small game hunting, predators need to be controlled.	4%	6%	7%	38%	45%
Loss of habitat is the most serious threat to wildlife today.	2%	5%	9%	34%	50%
More effort should be made to improve habitat on private farmland.	3%	4%	11%	39%	43%
Changes in farming practices have resulted in declines of small game populations.	4%	9%	17%	29%	42%

## Appendix A

Additional reasons for the decline in small game populations.  
(n=34)

Reason for decline	Percent Response
Loss of habitat to development	35%
Herbicide/pesticide run off, farmers' chemicals	32%
Woods/timber being cleared by farmers	18%
Lack of land set aside for habitat	3%
Not enough food	3%
Too much rain during the spring	3%
Population encroachment	3%
Poaching	3%