

# HARE TRACKS

FALL 2023

The Snowshoe Hare Cooperators' Newsletter

PENNSYLVANIA GAME COMMISSION

2001 Elmerton Ave, Harrisburg, PA 17110

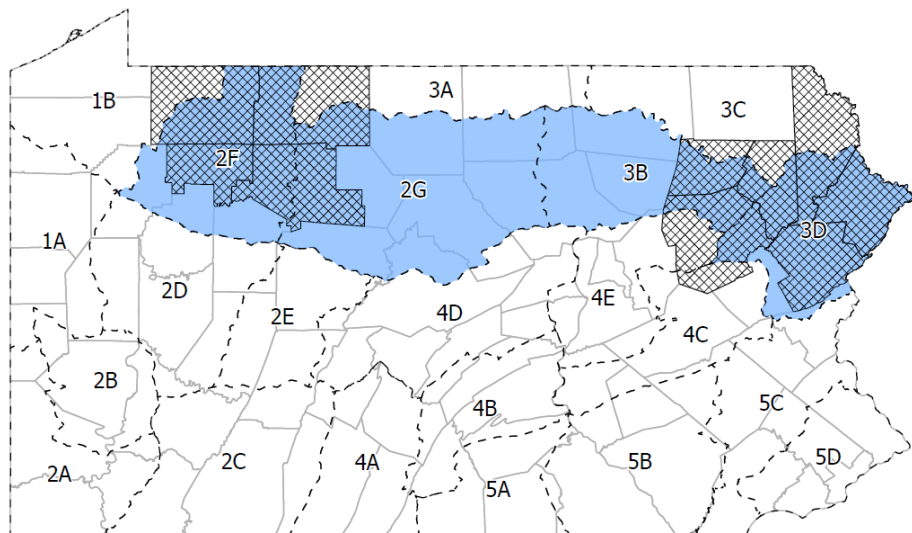


## Introduction

Late autumn greetings, Snowshoe Hare Cooperators! With this being only the second year of the program, let's first cover how important the data from last year's respondents is to our understanding of the species and why we hope to continue to grow this program.

The Game Take Survey, which has historically been used by the Pennsylvania Game Commission to monitor our snowshoe hare population, recorded snowshoe hare harvests in only three Wildlife Management Units (WMUs) last year, an increase by one WMU from the previous year. Not a single WMU has reported a hare harvest every year of the previous 10. We know this is due, in part, to the fact that Pennsylvania never had many snowshoe hare hunters. With that, they are harder for the statewide survey to pick up, but also, the number of hare hunters is decreasing even more quickly than the overall number of hunters in Pennsylvania.

About a third of newsletter recipients last year sent back their reports. A third of these responses were that they didn't hunt. From just a few responses, we were able to know the WMUs and counties where hares were being harvested as well as the WMUs and counties where hares were being flushed. Reported flushes are important because our 2021 snowshoe hare hunter mail survey showed 20% of hare hunting respondents use dogs to run hares, but do not try to harvest them. Flushes will also be the key metric used in future trend development of snowshoe hare populations from the survey as more variability exists in harvest rates.



From last year's cooperator data, we found hare harvests and flushes occurred in four WMUs. Hare hunting was recorded across 10 counties, nine of which reported hare detections. Hare hunters who submitted hunting activity information pursued hares, on average, in four counties during the season, with a max of seven counties covered during the season!

Responses for comparing flushes from previous years varied.

County	Down	No Answer	Same	Up	Total Responses
Elk	1		1		2
Forest			1		1
Lackawanna	1			1	2
McKean			1	2	3
Monroe			3	1	4
Unknown			1		1
Pike	1	1	1		3
Warren			1		1
Wyoming	1				1
Grand Total	4	1	9	4	18

## Research & Management

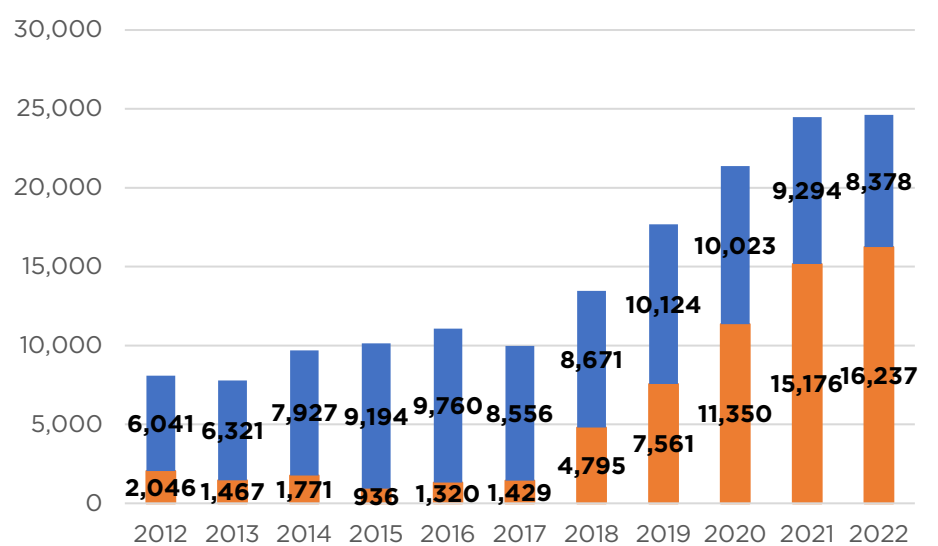
Previous research in Pennsylvania suggested areas treated with prescribed fire were initially unsuitable for hares. Along with collaborators from West Virginia and Pennsylvania Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Units, we compared snowshoe hare habitat use and survival between two study periods in northeastern Pennsylvania where prescribed fire has been used to restore scrub oak barrens habitat. Hares started using burned areas  $\geq 7$  years after the burns but avoided areas that had been burned more recently. Additionally, hare survival increased as the amount of time they spent in older burned areas ( $\geq 7$  years post-burn) increased. These results indicate prescribed burning in scrub oak barrens can be beneficial for hares, but there is a delay before this benefit is realized. This type of information is critical for habitat managers to effectively manage habitats across the landscape for species that benefit from early successional habitats, such as the snowshoe hare.

In September, staff presented a draft of Pennsylvania's first Snowshoe Hare Management Plan to the Pennsylvania Board of Game Commissioners. This 10-year plan lays out the goals, objectives, and strategies that will guide the agency's approach towards research and management of snowshoe hares. The board will vote in January on whether the plan will be accepted.

## Habitat Management

Habitat management, especially timber management, is critical to Pennsylvania's ability to maintain resilient future populations of snowshoe hares. More than 30,000 acres of forested habitat were improved for wildlife through the agency's forestry program in 2022. Nearly 9,000 acres of timber sales were sold, more than 16,000 acres of nontimber sale forest habitat improvements were made, and approximately 7,000 acres were treated with selective herbicides to promote native vegetation valuable to wildlife, such as food and cover. Timber markets have been uneven and unpredictable at times. Historically, timber markets directly drove the number of acres that were able to be harvested. As you can see below, the Game Commission is breaking habitat improvement records for many species, including snowshoe hares, on more acres and in more remote locations than we ever have been able to previously.

**Pennsylvania Game Commission  
Forest Habitat Acres Impacted  
2012-2022**



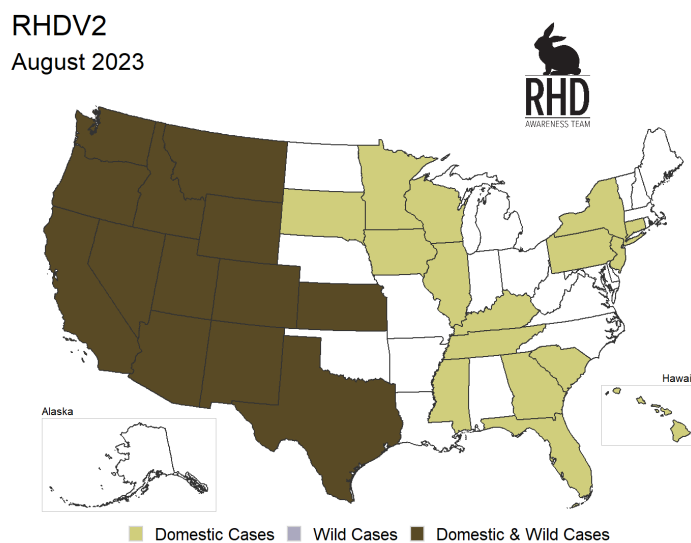
# Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Virus 2 (RHDV2)

RHDV2, a virus that causes Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease (RHD), was detected for the first time in Pennsylvania in domestic rabbits in Fayette County, in 2022. As of the printing of this newsletter, I am happy to report it has not yet been detected in any wild populations in Pennsylvania, and the Game Commission was able to dissolve its first Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease - Disease Management Area after 12 months of no further detections. Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease poses a significant threat to the Commonwealth's cottontail rabbit and snowshoe hare populations due to its ability to spread easily between domestic and wild rabbit and hare species, short incubation period, high mortality rates, and environmental persistence.

## Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease FAQs

### What is RHD?

Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Virus 2 is a foreign animal disease, meaning it is not typically found in the United States and is of high concern to domestic and wild animal health. In 2020, RHDV2 was detected in wild rabbit and hare populations in the United States and has now been declared endemic, meaning it is established and unlikely to go away, in many western States.



### How does RHDV2 spread?

Humans are the greatest threat to spreading RHDV2 across large distances. The virus is extremely hardy and highly contagious. It can spread between hares and rabbits in multiple ways, including direct contact with an infected living or dead hare or rabbit; ingestion of contaminated food or water; inhalation; contact with contaminated equipment, tools, and enclosures; and contact with urine, feces, and respiratory discharges from infected hares/rabbits. The virus can be spread by birds, biting insects, predators, scavengers, and humans. The virus can survive on clothing, shoes, or other items for months, enabling it to be inadvertently moved across the landscape by humans or other animals.

### What can I do to help?

Report any suspect RHD wild hare or rabbit mortality events - two or more dead wild hares/rabbits at the same location and at the same time with an unknown cause of death - by calling 1-833-PGC-WILD or at [www.pgcapps.pa.gov/WHS](http://www.pgcapps.pa.gov/WHS).

### Properly Dispose of Carcasses

If you find a dead wild hare/rabbit under circumstances that are not suggestive of RHD, or when disposing of parts of a harvested hare/rabbit, please take the following precautions:

1. Before handling the carcass, put on either disposable or washable gloves. If gloves are unavailable, a plastic bag can be used as a makeshift glove.
2. Dispose in commercial/residential trash - Place carcass in a plastic bag along with any disposable gloves that were used, then double bag everything before disposal.
3. On-site burial - A hole at least 2 feet deep will discourage scavenging. Do not bury the carcass in an area that could contaminate a water supply.
4. Wash your hands and clothing, then clean and disinfect any non-disposable equipment/gloves/tools that were used.

## Take Steps to Avoid Spreading RHD

After thoroughly removing organic material and cleaning with soap and water, disinfect all surfaces, tools, and equipment that may have contacted wild hares or rabbits using a 10% bleach solution (1 part bleach: 9 parts water). Allow 10 minutes of contact time before rinsing with clean water. Any boots worn in areas with reported rabbit mortalities should be cleaned and disinfected in the same manner. Place dirty clothing in a bag and wash it upon returning home.

For the most up-to-date Pennsylvania RHDV2 information and access to PGC's RHD Management Plan, visit:  
<https://www.pgc.pa.gov/Wildlife/WildlifeHealth/Pages/Rabbit-Hemorrhagic-Disease.aspx>.

## Pennsylvania Snowshoe Hare Cooperator Group

### We need your help!!!

We need your help to monitor our snowshoe hare population more directly by recording your days afield pursuing snowshoe hares, number of hares flushed per day, and whether you seek to harvest hares or not during the 2023 snowshoe hare season. **Please know we will never publish or share your personal information or specific, fine scale location information. All reports and presentations of the data that you submit will be reported at large geographic scales, such as county or Wildlife Management Unit.** In Pennsylvania, snowshoe hares face multifaceted threats, including habitat suitability, habitat fragmentation, being white on a sometimes-brown winter landscape, and now a disease that has the potential to spread quickly and cause high mortality rates. This is still a new group. If you know of others who may be interested in participating, please have them contact me via the contact information I have provided below. Please also feel free to reach out directly if you ever have a question or concern.

Good luck. Have fun. Hunt safely.

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2023 Snowshoe Hare Season Dates  
Dec. 26 - Jan. 1, 2024  
1 daily, 3 possession



