

Species Fact Sheet: Mountain Hare (*Lepus timidus*)



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Quick Facts

Recognition: Pelage is brown in summer, with a white tail; turns white in winter, dependent upon temperature, so not all individuals necessarily turn completely white. Long ears shorter than those of the brown hare and with slight black tips.

Size: 450-550mm in Scotland; 520-560mm in Ireland.

Weight: Approx 2.5 - 3.5kg - females slightly heavier than males.

Life Span: 3-4 years on average.



Distribution & Habitat

Mountain hares are indigenous to Britain, unlike the other lagomorphs, the rabbit and the Brown hare, which were introduced by man. Although elsewhere in its broad circumpolar distribution the mountain hare mainly occupies Boreal forest, in Britain it is associated with heather moorlands, particularly those which are managed by burning in strips for red grouse. It is native to the Highlands of Scotland but has been introduced to the Southern Uplands, the Peak District and on some Scottish Islands including Hoy (Orkney), Mainland (Shetland), Mull and Skye. In Ireland, there is a genetically very distinct form, the Irish hare *Lepus timidus hibernicus*.

General Ecology

Behaviour

Mountain hares are also known as blue hares, or colloquially in winter as white hares. They are considered to be the same species as the Arctic and Greenland hares. Population densities of mountain hares fluctuate periodically, varying at least 10-fold, and reaching a peak approximately every 10 years.

Mountain hares rest during the day in forms and scrapes which provide shelter and they sometimes make burrows in the earth or in snow, particularly when young. Their runs usually pass directly up slopes, rather than traversing slopes like those of sheep and deer. They are active at night, and although considered to be browsers of woody plants such as heather and other dwarf shrubs and trees, they prefer to eat grasses when they are available during the summer months. During periods of snow cover they gather on leeward hill slopes, in groups of 20+, to shelter or feed where shallow snow permits scraping to reveal underlying heather. The leverets are preyed upon by several predators including foxes, stoats, cats, buzzards and eagles; eagles are also major predators of adults.

Diet and Feeding

Heather (particularly *Calluna vulgaris*), grasses, rush and sedge species.

Reproduction

Male mountain hares become sexually mature each year before females, and mating takes place from the end of January onwards; gestation is 50 days. The season of births varies between years but is mainly in March-July. Neither females nor males are known to breed in their year of birth. Females variously produce between one and four litters a year, of 1-3 offspring, but occasionally more. Larger females breed earlier, and females in their first year suffer higher prenatal mortality in their earliest litter. Their reproductive behaviour is similar to that of brown hares, with several males chasing a single female who may rebuff them by boxing. The newly born leverets are fully-furred, have open eyes and receive little parental care other than an evening suckling visit by their mother.

Conservation status

No systematically collected information is available on long-term changes in numbers of mountain hares, over and above the usual periodic 10-year fluctuations, although on some western Scottish moors they are now rare where they were previously abundant. Their numbers have declined locally where favourable habitat such as former grouse moors has been afforested or heather has been removed by excessive grazing by other animals. Young forestry plantations can support high densities of hares which sometimes cause significant damage to trees, but these high densities decline once the forest canopy closes, and the ground vegetation is diminished.

Mountain hares are listed in Annex V of the EC Habitats Directive (1992), as a species 'of community interest whose taking in the wild and exploitation may be subject to management measures'. This conservation status means that certain methods of capture are prohibited or restricted. Mountain hares have historically been considered as small game with little commercial value either as a meat source or for shooting revenue. However, the shooting, which usually takes place in the winter months, is becoming increasingly commercialised, due to shortage of other game.