

Species Fact Sheet: Brown Hare (*Lepus europaeus*)



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Quick Facts

Recognition: Very long black-tipped ears; large powerful hind legs. Much more red than the mountain hare, and with a black-topped tail.

Size: Head & body 48-70cm, tail 7-13cm

Weight: Average 3-4kg

Life Span: Hares normally live to 3 or 4 years.



Distribution & Habitat

Brown hares were introduced in or before Roman times, most likely from the Netherlands. They are widespread on low ground throughout England, Wales and Scotland. Although they have been more recently introduced to Northern Ireland, they have not spread far. They have also been introduced to the Isle of Man and Mainland Orkney. In Scotland brown hares are found on farmland and rough grazing to the far north of the mainland, but are absent from parts of the North West. Brown hares are replaced by mountain hares in up-land areas of Scotland and central England.

General Ecology

Behaviour

Brown hares live in very exposed habitats, and they rely on acute senses and running at speeds of up to 70kph (45mph) to evade predators. Hares do not use burrows, but make a small depression in the ground among long grass - this is known as a form. They spend most of the day on or near the form, moving out to feed in the open at night. Though generally solitary, hares sometimes band into loose groups when feeding.

Diet and Feeding

Tender wild grass shoots, cereal crops and some other agricultural crops, and herbs.

Reproduction

Breeding takes place between March and July and a female can rear up to three litters a year, each of one to four young. The young, known as leverets, are born fully furred with their eyes open and are left by the female in forms a few metres from their birth place. Once a day for the first four weeks of their lives, the leverets gather at sunset to be fed by the female, but otherwise they receive no parental care. This avoids attracting predators to the young at a stage when they are most vulnerable. Foxes are important predators of young hares and where foxes are common there are likely to be few hares.

Conservation Status

Brown hares have little legal protection, partly because they are game animals and can be managed by farmers and landowners, and partly because they are also a minor pest and can damage crops and young tree plantations. Numbers of hares have declined substantially since the beginning of this century, though they are still common animals in many parts of the country. The main reason for this decline seems to be a change in the way farms are run. Today's modern farms are intensive and specialised, either growing crops like wheat and oilseed rape, or raising livestock for meat and dairy produce. A hundred years ago most farms were mixed enterprises. Mixed farms have a patchwork quilt of fields which provide year-round grazing for hares as well as long crops for them to hide in. Modern cereal farms provide little or no food for hares in late summer and autumn, and livestock farms have few crops for them to hide in. Modern farm machinery and pesticides also kill many hares.

Another reason is that there now appears to be many more foxes in the countryside than there were a hundred years ago. Hare shooting still occurs in areas where hares are common and where farms want to reduce crop damage. Hare hunting with beagles and harriers used to occur throughout Britain, and hare coursing events were run by several coursing clubs, but these are now illegal (since Hunting Act 2002) in the UK; hare coursing, though controlled, is still legal in Ireland. Hares are very often poached, particularly with lurchers cross-bred from collies and greyhounds.