

Mammal Society joins appeal to safeguard of mountain hare populations in Scotland



Image by Robin Bennett

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The Mammal Society has joined a coalition of ten environmental and outdoor organisations calling for action by the Scottish Government to introduce urgent safeguards for mountain hare populations.

Mountain hares are indigenous to Britain, unlike rabbits Brown hares, which were introduced by the Romans. Almost all of the British population is found in Scotland, with just a small population surviving in the Peak District in England. They particularly favour heather moorland, and there has been concern about the very intensive culling of mountain hares that has been taking place on some grouse moors.

The group of organisations, which also includes; RSPB Scotland, Scottish Wildlife Trust, Scottish Raptor Study Group, Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group, Cairngorms Campaign, National Trust Scotland, Royal Zoological Society of Scotland, John Muir Trust and Mountaineering Scotland are asking for a temporary complete ban of all mountain hare culling on grouse moors. This should continue until more is known about the size of local hare populations and it is established that culling does not compromise the sustainability of these populations .

Despite being under a period of “voluntary restraint”, mountain hare culls continue on a large and unprecedented scale across many grouse moors in Scotland, potentially causing

the Scottish Government to breach its legally binding international obligations for this species.

In 2014, the coalition warned the Scottish Government that the 'voluntary restraint' claimed to be in place was unlikely to protect these mammals from wide-scale culls on grouse moors, including in the Cairngorms National Park. Since then, reports of culls have been numerous and are thought to be driving a significant decline in numbers of mountain hare, possibly even leading to local extinctions in some areas.

Prof Fiona Mathews from The Mammal Society says, *"Mountain hares are part of culture and ecology of the Scottish mountains. We support this call for urgent action from the Scottish Government to intervene and introduce safeguards to protect the mountain hare. At the moment, very little information is available on the size and sustainability of mountain hare populations. It is vital that any future management on mountain hares is based on sound scientific evidence to avoid the risk of local extinctions. ."*

Sightings of mountain hares can be reported using The Mammal Society's free Mammal Tracker App www.mammal.org.uk/mammal_tracker or via the website: www.mammal.org.uk/mammal_tracker.

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Editors notes:

1. Mountain hares (*Lepus timidus*) and are native to Britain.
2. Mountain hares are protected against unsustainable killing by the European Union's Habitats Directive. However, they are now routinely culled on a large scale on many grouse moors. This practice has developed relatively recently, partly in response to the belief that it protects red grouse against the tick-borne louping ill virus and so increases the surplus of grouse to be shot at the end of the summer. However it is known that other tick-hosts (including sheep and deer) are more important in the spread of louping ill, and that mountain hare culls are therefore unlikely to contribute to the control of the disease.
3. The mountain hare is Britain's only native hare and plays a vital part of the complex ecosystem of Scotland's uplands and moorlands, including acting as an important source of prey for golden eagles, one of Scotland's most well known birds.
4. Mountain hares are understood to spread very slowly from one area to another, meaning culls may have significant detrimental impacts on local populations.

5. In December 2014, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) along with other partners, announced the beginning of a three year study to trial methods of measuring mountain hare numbers to better inform their monitoring, how to assess their population status, and identify appropriate management measures. As part of this, SNH called for a voluntary restraint of large scale mountain hare culls on grouse moors.
6. The Mammal Society works at the interface of science, policy making and practice. As the only society with an interest in all British mammals, its mission is to provide the scientific evidence-base for effective conservation and management.
7. The Mammal Society is currently conducting the official review of the conservation status and population size of British mammals for the English, Scottish and Welsh governments. The Mammal Atlas, which tracks the change in mammal distribution over the last 20 years will be launched in October 2017 followed by a Red List of British Mammals highlighting the species most at risk of extinction or critical decline in the UK.