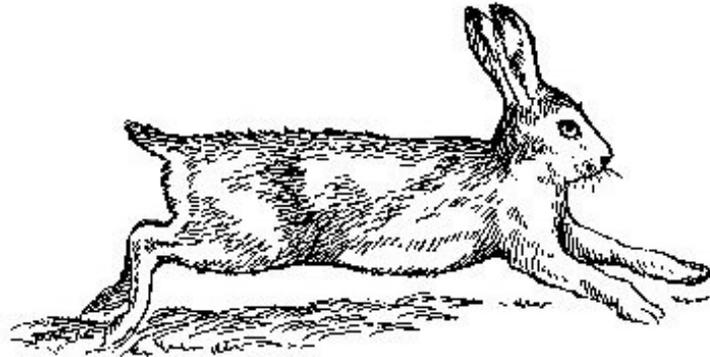


Brown Hare (*Lepus europaeus*)

The Brown Hare is a familiar mammal of open arable land and rough pasture throughout most of Britain. It is primarily nocturnal and feeds on grasses and occasionally cereals and root crops. They may have been introduced to Britain around the time of the Romans, although the archaeological evidence is not conclusive.



1 Definition

Brown Hares are adapted to living in open habitat and are well adapted for running. In Britain, they are usually associated with lowland pasture and arable farmland, feeding mainly on grasses and herbs as well as agricultural crops. Unlike Rabbits, they do not make a burrow, but hide in shallow depressions in the ground or in long grass, known as forms. Woods and hedgerows also provide day-time shelter, particularly in winter. Although they are normally nocturnal, their activity can extend into mornings and evenings during summer.

Hares are usually born between February and October and a female can produce up to three litters of 1-4 young (leverets) per year. Fox predation of young Hares can be heavy, causing a significant reduction in the recruitment of young Hares to the population. Hares can also experience high losses due to disease, but this tends to occur only when they are living at higher densities.

During the last century, there has been a gradual decline in Hare numbers and agricultural intensification is thought to be the main factor. The decline has been most pronounced in the western regions where increased stocking densities of livestock and a greater reliance of silage cutting have been the main causes. There have been less dramatic changes in arable areas, but hare numbers have still declined in these areas because of a reduction in habitat richness, such as a change to large fields with less crop diversity. More recently, a change to winter-sown cereals has led to a reduction in higher-quality food in early summer, leading to food shortages and a lower leveret survival rate.

Losses elsewhere mean that East Anglian populations are more important. Suffolk has a responsibility for a significant percentage of the national Brown Hare population. It is difficult to estimate the impact of field sports on hare numbers. Whilst there is little evidence that this has a long-term effect on population levels, these effects may be more significant where hare numbers are low or at certain times of the year. For example, a Hare shoot in February can remove 60% of the breeding stock.

2 Current status

2.1 National

The Brown Hare has declined substantially, by about 80% over the last 100 years with a sharper decline since the early 1960s. National surveys indicate that numbers have remained largely stable over the last 10 years. Current estimates are in the region of 800,000 animals. It remains widespread, being particularly numerous in East Anglia, but is scarce in Cornwall and is absent from the north-west and Highlands of Scotland.

2.2 Local

Information supplied by The Game Conservancy Trust demonstrates that although numbers fluctuate from year to year, there is no evidence that populations have declined in East Anglia during the last five to ten years. The Brown Hare is still widespread in Suffolk and there is little evidence of any large decline in recent years.

3 Current factors affecting the Brown Hare in Suffolk

- Conversion of grassland to arable farmland leading to a reduction in habitat richness and potential food shortages at certain times of year.
- Loss of general habitat diversity in the agricultural landscape such as field margins and hedgerows as well as crop diversity.
- Changes in planting and cropping regimes.
- Prolonged wet weather during the spring is thought to have adverse effects on breeding performance.
- Foxes are important predators of leverets and changes in their numbers are likely to have as much impact as agricultural changes.

4 Current Action

4.1 Legal Status

Brown Hares do not have protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, but are protected by a complex set of older acts such as the Game Laws, the Ground game Act 1880 and the Hare Preservation Act 1892.

4.2 Management, research and guidance

National surveys in the winters of 1991-93 and 1997-99 have played an important role in highlighting the status of the Brown Hare. In addition, the Game Conservancy Trust, as one of the Lead Partners, monitors regional and national changes through game bag records. There have been no specific surveys of Brown Hare in Suffolk.

Whilst existing populations of Brown Hare appear to be being maintained, being able to meet the long term national target of doubling spring numbers in Britain by 2010 is dependent upon significant improvements to their habitat.

The Game Conservancy Trust has produced a set of guidelines to promote Hare conservation through improving cover and food availability. On cereal farms, game crops, hedgerows and small woodlands will particularly benefit Hares in winter, by providing cover and shelter whilst in summer grassy field margins provide food for adult Hares and leverets. On livestock farms, fencing off ditches, banks and other features will allow long grass to develop providing leverets with protection from predators. Many of these measures are grant-aided through agri-environment schemes and these incentives will play an important role in ensuring that existing populations are maintained and expanded.

5 Action Plan Objectives and Targets

1 *Maintain existing Brown Hare populations.*

2 *Influence farmland management by developing a conservation strategy for the Brown Hare.*

6 Brown Hare: Proposed Action with Lead Agencies

Action	Date	Partners
POLICY AND LEGISLATION		
Incorporate needs of Brown Hare in Breckland and Suffolk River Valleys ESAs.	2004	Defra
SITE SAFEGUARD AND MANAGEMENT		
Promote appropriate management practices through Defra agri-environment schemes.	2004 2005 2006 2007	FWAG, Defra
SPECIES MANAGEMENT AND PROTECTION		
Ensure landowners are aware of the importance of avoiding Hare shoots in late winter.	2004 2005 2006 2007	FWAG, Defra
RESEARCH AND MONITORING		
Encourage other local research or survey, especially when linked to farmland management.	2004 2005 2006 2007	Defra
Promote counts of Brown Hare by land managers. Ensure data is passed on to SBRC.	2004 2005 2006 2007	Defra, GCT
ADVISORY		
Provide information on Brown Hare management and biology to landowners.	2004 2005 2006 2007	Defra, GCT
COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLICITY		
Produce guidance leaflet on habitat management for Brown Hares.	2004	Defra, SWT