

■ FEATURE: Brown hare

# Boxing days

THE BROWN HARE IS NOT A TRUE NATIVE OF THE BRITISH ISLES, AND YET HAS MANAGED TO LOPE ITS WAY INTO OUR AFFECTIONS, BECOMING A MUCH-LOVED SYMBOL OF THE COUNTRYSIDE. **LUCY LUSH** OF THE GREATER MANCHESTER BIODIVERSITY PROJECT CHARTS ITS CHANGING FORTUNES AND EXPLAINS HOW PTES FUNDS ARE HELPING SUPPORT THIS ICONIC SPECIES.



ANDREW PARKINSON

*Brown hares are much in evidence in the spring months, partly because crops have yet to grow tall enough to hide them, but also because the urge to breed makes them uncharacteristically bold and conspicuous.*

■ FEATURE: Brown hare

**T**he brown hare was introduced to Britain by the Romans more than 2000 years ago.

In the intervening years it has become an iconic symbol of the British countryside. Rather than being reviled like other interlopers such as the grey squirrel, it has established itself with ease as part of the agricultural scene and has even become a firm favourite with farmers. Perhaps the ease with which we have accepted the species is because it does not directly compete with any of our native animals. The most similar native in terms of ecology is the mountain hare, but that resides in moorland habitats above 500 metres, so competition for habitat and food between the two is minimal.

*'The brown hare has established itself with ease as part of the agricultural scene, and is even a firm favourite with farmers'*

### Game on

Historically, the brown hare was regarded primarily as a game species. We know it was hunted extensively by the ancient Greeks and the practice has continued for thousands of years, during which the species was deliberately encouraged to spread. It is now found right across the lowlands of Europe. In Britain the species has a long history of management on large estates as game. The records kept by these estates mean that we have a very helpful source of data regarding population sizes. Records are still collected through the National Game Bag census, which was formalised in 1961. The number of hares bagged is a good indicator of population changes, although not wholly accurate, because it can reflect inflated population numbers on some estates and be influenced by shooting practices.

It is estimated that there were around four million brown hares in Britain in the 1800s, but numbers had dropped significantly since 1960, by an estimated 75%. Because of this abrupt decline in a once widespread species, the brown hare was included in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan as a priority UK species. Worryingly, a more recent study by the Tracking Mammals

Partnership in 2008 revealed a continuing overall decline in the UK between 1995-2007, with the most significant losses being sustained in the West Midlands, north west England and Scotland.

### Protection for hares

Hares have limited protection under The Hare Protection Act (1911) that prevents the sale of adults or leverets between 1st March and 31st July; and from the Ground

Game Act (1880) that restricts the right to shoot hares to landowners or tenants. This could have led to an increase in culling if the species was seen as a pest. More recently,

hare coursing was banned under the Hunting Act (2004) but illegal coursing still occurs and is a major problem. The Hare Preservation Trust is currently campaigning to increase protection for the brown hare through protected species status.

A study carried out at Bristol University in 1996 investigated the status of the brown hare in Britain and concluded that one of the major causes of the species' decline

was the intensification of agriculture and changes in land management. Brown hares require a mosaic of habitats with habitat richness being an important

*Brown hares do not use burrows and live their entire lives in the open. They rest and rear their young in slight depressions in the ground vegetation, but in early spring this provides them with very little cover.*



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*Scent is highly important to brown hares. Splashes of urine and droppings serve to communicate information between individuals, and smells carried in the air give warning of predators in the vicinity.*



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aspect. Ideal habitat for brown hares includes a mix of hedgerows, woodland, grassland, field margins, arable crops and pasture. Other factors that have contributed to regional declines in varying degrees include predation by foxes, disease, wetter weather and illegal coursing.

Victorian farming practices provided ideal habitat for brown hares, with a patchwork of habitats,

smaller field sizes that allowed easier movement between them and access to varying grass, cereal and root crops at different times of year. Modern crop rotation and the removal of hedgerows results in limited cover and forage during the summer months and increases the risk of predation of leverets by foxes. The increased use of herbicides and modern grass

*Two activities dominate the springtime antics of brown hares: chasing and boxing. Both can involve two or more individuals of both sexes. Males attempt to see off their rivals, while females give all suitors a run for their money and fight off unwelcome attention.*

cutting machines has also proved to be bad news for brown hares, leading to many unpleasant and untimely demises.

### Saving space

A more recent change to agricultural practice has been the loss of set-aside land. This has had an unfortunate impact on numbers of farmland birds and the loss of habitat is also likely to have affected many other species including the brown hare. In an attempt to reclaim the benefits provided by set-aside, a voluntary scheme has been put in place called the Campaign for the Farmed Environment. This brings together partners including the Country Land & Business Association, National Farmers Union, RSPB and Natural England. It is not just aimed at improving matters for farmland birds but also for other farmland wildlife, through improvements in resource protection. If the scheme is successful, and combined with entry into environmental stewardship schemes, it will increase food sources and cover for brown hares through the creation of buffer zones, flower rich grasslands, and changes to crop management.

## fact FILE Brown hare



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Brown hares are related to rabbits and are classified in the mammal order Lagomorpha and the family Leporidae. There are two species of hare in the UK, the mountain hare and the brown hare. Brown hares are thought to have been introduced to the UK by the Romans about 2000 years ago, but originated in central Asia.

**COMMON NAMES** European hare, brown hare, European brown hare

**SCIENTIFIC NAME** *Lepus europaeus*

**DESCRIPTION** Similar characteristics to rabbits but much larger, with longer black-tipped ears, longer hind legs and a black topped tail; the body is a warm brown russet colour above, paler on the belly. Body length ranges from 48–70cm.

**HABITAT** Arable farmland and open grasslands.

**HABITS** Predominantly nocturnal; lives above ground and hides in shallow depressions, or forms, during the day; runs at speeds up to 70kmph (45mph) and uses speed to escape predation; 'boxing matches' take place in spring as part of mating ritual.

**DIET** Herbivorous; mainly grasses, cereals and herbs.

**BREEDING** Mating season is from February to September; 3 or 4 litters of 3 or more leverets a year, with a gestation period of 41–42 days; young are left for most of the day and only receive one visit from the mother at sunset to be suckled. Successful breeding depends on warm dry weather. Average life expectancy is 3–4 years, with females reaching maturity around 8 months and males at 6 months.

**DISTRIBUTION** Lowland areas across the UK, particularly in the east and south west of England.

**CONSERVATION STATUS** Species has undergone substantial decline since 1960s, with significant losses in the West Midlands, north west England and Scotland.

Illegal hare coursing has been on the increase in certain parts of the UK, with underground groups getting together to organise meets and often trespassing on private land. The true extent of the problem is still not fully known but it is believed to be widespread across the UK. As well as the obvious direct impact this has on the hares killed during coursing, there is a further problem that aggressive unwanted visitors on private land could lead to farmers culling brown hares as a deterrent. These further unnecessary deaths complete a most unfortunate double-whammy. A number of initiatives have been set up to target illegal coursing and these have led directly to prosecutions, but more needs to be done.

The success of brown hare populations relies on a habitat-rich mosaic landscape.

These requirements mean the species can be used as a biological indicator for the quality of the farmed landscape in general. Any

habitat management that is done for brown hares will be on a landscape scale and therefore increase the richness of the habitat to the benefit of many other species of wildlife, including farmland birds. It is perhaps no surprise that the brown hare is starting to be

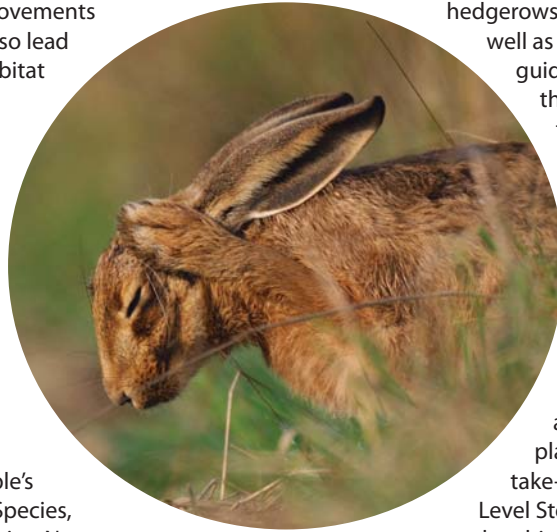
promoted as a symbol of a healthy functioning farmland ecosystem. If land is managed appropriately for brown hares, the improvements will almost certainly also lead to gains in terms of habitat richness for the wider landscape.

### A new project

The North West Brown Hare Project is a large partnership project covering parts of Greater Manchester, south Lancashire and north Merseyside. It has recently received funding from the People's Trust for Endangered Species, from SITA Trust's Enriching Nature Programme and The Tree Council's Hedge Fund, to appoint a dedicated

project officer for two years. This role will involve the collation and analysis of existing data, as well as training up volunteers to conduct detailed

surveys across the project area. The data will be used to gain a better understanding of the population in the north west and to highlight areas to target for habitat management to increase connectivity between populations and improve habitats for brown



*When you have a fur coat that is required to keep you warm and dry in all weathers, it pays to take good care of it. Brown hares spend a significant part of each day grooming, using teeth, tongue and paws to comb out dust, dirt and parasites.*

*'Brown hares rely on a habitat-rich mosaic landscape. This makes them ideal biological indicators of high-quality farmland landscape'*

hares and farmland birds.

Part of the habitat management will include the planting of hedgerows and hedge trees, as well as providing advice and guidance to landowners on the best way to manage their land for brown hares. The project will work with partner organisations to help landowners, including local authorities and Wildlife Trusts, to adopt best practice management through agreed management plans. It will encourage take-up of Entry/Higher Level Stewardship and membership of the Campaign for the Farmed Environment, and hold events to promote awareness and provide advice.

It is hoped that initiatives such as the North West Brown Hare Project will provide much needed data on brown hare populations at a local level and enable targeted habitat management to be implemented. It will also contribute towards the UK Biodiversity Action Plan, as well as local BAP targets to double the national population of hares. All this should ensure that brown hares are here to stay, and that the iconic sight of their springtime boxing matches remains a familiar one in this, their adopted homeland. Pretty good going for an incomer from continental Europe.

*It is very difficult to sneak up on a brown hare. The large eyes located on the sides of the head give it almost 360° of vision, and its enormous ears swivel to focus on the slightest sound. These are vital adaptations in a species that lives in the open.*

## Great gift idea!

Visit [www.ptes.org/shop](http://www.ptes.org/shop) for details of a new *Gift of Nature* that will help to halt the loss of brown hares in England.

A £10 *Gift of Nature* will fund a visit to a landowner by a North West Brown Hare Project Officer, to help them to create a conservation management plan to save the brown hare.

people's trust for  
**endangered  
species**

