



Brown Hare (*Lepus europaeus*)



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The Brown Hare is one of the three species of the family Leporidae living in Britain. Its closest relative the mountain hare (*L. timidus*) is native and is largely restricted to northern hills and to Ireland. The Rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) is widespread and was introduced by the Normans. It was thought that our Brown Hares were also introduced, brought in by the Romans. Recent re-examination of the archaeological evidence, however, shows that they were already established before the invasion. They prefer open countryside and are at their highest densities in the arable east but commonly occur on mixed and pastoral farms as well. They were considered to be solitary, but at night when active spend much of their time in groups.

1 Objectives and Targets

1.1 Objectives

- A. Establish and maintain a comprehensive understanding of brown hare distribution and status in Shropshire.
- B. Increase the numbers and range of brown hares in Shropshire.
- C. To ensure that all suitable habitat in the County is occupied by Brown Hares.
- D. Promote communication, education and awareness of the status and needs of brown hares.

1.2 Targets

- Ensure a significant increase in numbers of brown hares in Shropshire by 2010
- Ensure brown hares and their habitat requirements are included in Environmental Stewardship targeting statements to encourage agri-environment agreements.
- Use knowledge gained of habitat requirements to establish five additional populations by 2010.

Shropshire Biodiversity Action Plan

2 Current Status

2.1 Importance

Although Brown Hares are distributed widely in Shropshire it is currently regarded as an animal of conservation concern and is included in the Red Data book for Mammals (1993).

2.2 Trends

There has been a substantial decline in hare numbers which began over a hundred years ago. A national Brown Hare survey by Bristol University, in conjunction with the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) in 1991-93 and confirmed in 1997-1999, found the pre breeding adult population of Britain to be only 20% of the estimated hare population in 1880. Much of this decline is recent, 70% of counties recorded a lower number of sites with hares in the 1990s than in the 1980s and 75% of counties recorded a lower number of hares per site than in previous decades. Although the decrease is occurring throughout England it is more severe and has been of longer duration in western counties such as Shropshire.

2.3 Population and Distribution

There are an estimated 817,500 to 1,250,000 brown hares in Britain. Precise population estimates are not available in Shropshire but records indicate that they are widespread.

3 Current Factors Affecting the Species

- Many changes in farming practices have contributed to the decline of hares. Habitat fragmentation, loss of mixed habitat and reduction in habitat richness lead to periods of food shortage that are poorly tolerated by hares.
- Increases in stocking density and silage cutting are probably important. The change from spring-sown to winter-sown cereals on arable land, increased herbicide use and faster, larger machinery have also all had effects.
- Fox predation may have an impact on young hares but its local effect is unknown.
- Hares can be vulnerable to traffic deaths, especially when they need to cross roads from their daytime forms to feeding areas.
- Hares are shot throughout Britain. This may not have contributed to the decline but may become more significant as the population decreases.

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4 Current Action

4.1 Policy and Protection

- Brown hares have limited legal protection through the Ground Game Act (1880) and the Hare Protection Act (1911). As game animals brown hares can be managed by farmers and landowners. They are also considered a minor pest as they may damage crops and young tree plantations. Brown hares can not be offered for sale between 1st March and 31st July to discourage shooting during the main breeding season. Apart from this they are unprotected.
- The national brown hare SAP commits the government to doubling brown hare spring numbers by 2010.
- The brown hare is also included in the Red Data Book for British Mammals, 1993.

4.2 Management, Research and Survey

- National surveys have contributed to our understanding of the dynamics of brown hare populations.
- Existing Countryside Stewardship Schemes (CSS) and Environmentally Sensitive Area Schemes (ESAs) plus the new Environment Stewardship Schemes (ESS), in particular the Higher Level Scheme, are likely to be improving brown hare habitat.
- A number of local areas are managed in ways that are sympathetic to brown hares e.g. the large Natural England and SWT reserves such as Stiperstones and Whixall Moss and the areas influenced by the Shropshire Hills AONB and the Clun Valley ESA.

5 Key Habitats

- Arable farmland.
- Mixed grazing pastures.
- Hedgerows, arable headlands and field margins.
- Open woodland
- Rough grassland.

6 Complementary Plans

UK	Brown Hare SAP
Shropshire	Arable Field Margins HAP
Shropshire	Floodplain Grazing Marsh HAP
Shropshire	Hedgerows HAP
Shropshire	Lowland Heathland HAP
Shropshire	Semi-improved Upland Rough Grazing HAP
Shropshire	Species Rich Grassland HAP
Shropshire	Lowland Wood Pasture, Parkland & Veteran Trees HAP

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7 Action Plan

Habitat/ Species	Action code	Action text	Location of action	Start date	End date	Lead	Assisting
Brown Hare	SHR BRH CA01	Train a network of volunteers	Shropshire	2006	-	SMG	SWT
Brown Hare	SHR BRH CA02	Liaise with landowners and land managers to achieve positive habitat management.	Shropshire	2006	2010	FWAG	SMG
Brown Hare	SHR BRH CP01	Work with community based groups to raise awareness of brown hare conservation issues in the general public.	Shropshire	2006	2010	SWT	
Brown Hare	SHR BRH ID01	Contact shooting interests (BASC, Game Conservancy Trust) to obtain data on sightings.	Shropshire	2006		SMG	
Brown Hare	SHR BRH ID02	Introduce and publicise internet based record submission to encourage reports of hare sightings.	Shropshire	2006	2006	SMG	SWT
Brown Hare	SHR BRH ID03	Collate and map all existing brown hare records	Shropshire	2006	2006	SMG	SWT
Brown Hare	SHR BRH SU01	Design methodology and forms for volunteer surveys.	Shropshire	2006	2006	SMG	SWT
Brown Hare	SHR BRH SU02	Co-ordinate systematic surveys in areas not covered by volunteers	Shropshire	2006	2010	SMG	SWT
Brown Hare	SHR BRH SU03	Re-survey the population once every ten years to monitor changes in population size.	Shropshire	2015	-	SMG	SWT

Shropshire Biodiversity Action Plan

Key to organisations

SMG	Shropshire Mammal Group
NE	Natural England
FWAG	Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group
SWT	Shropshire Wildlife Trust
SBP	Shropshire Biodiversity Partnership
BASC	British Association for Shooting and Conservation

Hardcopy correct on 17.03.2009