

WILDLIFE

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The Irish hare, (*Lepus timidus hibernicus*) is a sub-species of the mountain hare (*Lepus timidus*) and only occurs in Ireland. Male animals are referred to as jacks, females as does. Having arrived in these parts as the ice sheets melted around 10,000 years ago, Irish hares developed differences to other mountain hare populations, which have a broad circumpolar distribution.

The most striking difference is that generally the coat of the Irish hare does not go totally white in winter. Irish hares have only two moults a year rather than 3, and generally stay brown through the winter months, though they may become pale, or develop white patches. The tail is often noted as being all white, but there are exceptions. Irish hares are different to other Lagomorphs (hares and rabbits) in Ireland as unlike brown hares (*Lepus europaeus*) and rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) they were not introduced by man. The status of the brown hare is uncertain in Northern Ireland. There may be small populations in Counties Tyrone and Londonderry.

DESCRIPTION

The Irish hare is a medium sized plant-eater (herbivore), measuring up to 50cms long, and weighing between 2.5 – 4 kg. It has a russet brown coat, long ears with black tips and eyes set high in the head which give it a wide field of view. The animal has long powerful back legs, longer than the fore legs, and Irish hares may reach speeds of up to 30mph and can jump heights of around 2m. Speed is the main means of escape, rather than going to cover. The animals are generally quiet, but may scream or growl.

GENERAL ECOLOGY

Irish hares feed mainly on a variety of grasses, but, depending on the habitat, sedges, shrubs such as heather, thyme and bilberry and even shoots from certain trees may play an important part in their diet. Hares will also venture on to the foreshore to feed on sea lettuce and other sea weeds. They feed mostly at night resting during daylight hours in a scraped, or nibbled hollow or "form", although there are records of hares using rabbit burrows, crevices in rock and other shelters for refuge or lie-up sites. Suitable habitat is vital for the survival of the Irish hare, as not only do they require a supply of different grasses and plants to eat, but also plenty of cover, for example rushes and heather. Freedom from disturbance also appears to be critical and hares are rarely found near houses or built-up areas.



IRISH HARE

BREEDING

Courtship and mating take place from late winter through to early summer with the characteristic "mad", chasing, leaping and boxing behavior being an aspect of challenges between males, and also between males and females with the does rebuffing the advances of the jacks. There can be up to three litters of 1 – 4 young (leverets) a year but mortality is high with up to three quarters of the leverets being lost during the first year. Young are hidden by the does and disperse after one week but will return to this early hiding place for up to 3 weeks for further nursing until they are weaned. The maximum life expectancy of the Irish hare is 9 years.

Hares are social animals with groups being generally between 2 and 9. Larger groups may be seen, especially during the breeding season in suitable habitat. Herds of well over a hundred hares have been recorded in the past from certain sites, for example Belfast International Airport. Apart from man and dog, there are a range of predators that have an impact on Irish hare populations principally the fox, but also badger, pine marten, stoat, cat, buzzard, hooded crow, magpie, long-eared owl and at one time golden eagle.

HABITATS AND DISTRIBUTION

The Irish hare is found from seashore to hill-top, mainly in open country, in many habitats including:

- unimproved and semi-improved pasture, expanding into areas of intensive farmland
- upland habitats including heather dominated heaths and bogs
- coastal habitats including dunes, coastal stripes and seashore
- golf courses
- air fields

Recent research suggests that it may be the variety of grasses within the hare's diet that limit its distribution. Hares seem to avoid areas of improved grassland dominated by rye grass species though there are certainly other factors contributing to this absence, such as distribution and lack of cover. All of these factors suggest that changes in farming methods and management of the farmed landscape may have an important part to play in both the decline and the future conservation of this species.

POPULATION

Historically the Irish hare was once widespread and common throughout Ireland. However there is a growing concern that populations are thought to have gone through a substantial decline over the past 10 – 20 years. Recent surveys commissioned by EHS have shown that the population of Irish Hares in Northern Ireland has fluctuated between 14,000 and 72,000; the most recent estimate is 43,700. It is intended to continue monitoring the population at regular intervals.

STATUS AND PROTECTION

Because of concerns for the conservation of Irish Hares, a series of temporary Special Protection Orders each lasting for 1 year has been made. The SPOs make it illegal to take Irish Hares by any method.

Our aim is to protect, conserve and promote the natural and built environment for the benefit of present and future generations.

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- The Irish hare is listed in Annex V (a) of the EU Directive 92/43/EEC Habitats Directive which determines that a species may be exploited provided that this is compatible with their maintenance at a favorable conservation status.
- The Irish hare is listed as a Priority Species in the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy. A Species Action Plan has been drawn up and is being implemented.
- In the Irish Red Data Book it is listed as internationally important.

THREATS

- Loss of cover (e.g. rushes) and refuge areas (e.g. hedgerows)
- Conversion from species rich grasslands to ryegrass and clover mixes
- Increased disturbance especially from high stocking densities and farm machinery
- Direct grazing competition on hill areas (with sheep)
- Habitat fragmentation

Increased mechanisation disturbs hares and increases mortality especially among leverets at time of grass cutting/harvest. Increased levels of predation particularly from foxes, crows and magpies especially affecting leverets. Over-hunting due to illegal coursing and lamping. Increased mortality on roads due to increase in traffic volume and speed.

CONSERVATION AIMS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The Species Action Plan has these objectives and targets:

- Maintain the existing range and demonstrate a population increase by 2005.
- Double present population by 2010 over as much of the range as possible.
- Maintain and increase the area and quality of suitable hare habitat.

There are a number of key opportunities for landowners and those in the farming community to make a significant contribution to the conservation of the species.

Specific actions that would be beneficial to the Irish hare:

- Maintaining varied grass species in pasture/ reducing dominance of ryegrass species (*Lolium* spp.).
- Late cutting of grass – to reduce leveret mortality.
- Reducing stocking levels of livestock; notably cattle and sheep.
- Reducing applications of Nitrogen based fertilisers that stimulate competitive grasses.
- Good hedgerow management.
- Set aside.
- Maintenance of varied habitat with plenty of cover.

Agri-environment schemes for farmers, such as Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs) and the Countryside Management Scheme (CMS) can make an important contribution to the protection of suitable hare habitat.