

The Irish Hare

Lepus timidus hibernicus



The Irish hare is one of our most widespread wild mammals, present from sea shore to mountain top and familiar on bogs as well as on farmland. It is Ireland's only native lagomorph (a group which includes all hare and rabbit species) The Irish hare is a sub-species of *Lepus timidus*. This species has a widespread distribution across the northern hemisphere, from Ireland to the Pacific Ocean.

One of the main differences between the Irish hare and other sub-species of *Lepus timidus* is that the former does not turn white in winter.

Hares live above ground and have developed particular strategies to cope with such a life style. Leverets (young hares) are born fully furred with open eyes and are capable of moving about soon after birth. The gestation period of the Irish hare is about 50 days.

Hares have highly developed senses of hearing and smell and their vision is good, particularly for moving objects. They are therefore well adapted for predator detection. Once discovered, the hare has two main strategies for avoiding predators – fight and concealment. Their long powerful hind limbs allow them to outrun most predators.

In general, hares tend to be nocturnal animals, feeding mainly at night and spending the day in a inactive state. In winter, when the nights are long, very little daytime activity may be observed, but during the spring when breeding behavior is at its height. The two best known images are of the "mad March hare" and the "boxing hare" and both are linked with breeding activity. A female hare due to come into oestrous (breeding condition) will often have an entourage of males waiting in anticipation. The competition between these males and the attempts of the female to avoid them, often results in spectacular chases and fighting. More often than not, boxing is between an unwilling female and an over-eager male, rather than between two males.

A female hare will usually have two to three litters in a year, with an average of two to four young in each litter.

Instead of making use of burrows for protection, hares make shelters known as forms. Forms are usually situated in longer vegetation in which hares make allows using their front legs and head. Once constructed, a hare usually backs into its form so that the longer vegetation shelters the body and there is a clear view from the front. The typical position for an inactive hare is crouching in a form with the front legs tucked under the body and eyes half shut. Despite this slumbering pose, a crouching hare reacts instantly to disturbance and either flattens down further in the surrounding vegetation, sits up to investigate, or runs away.

Hares are exclusively herbivorous and their diet tends to reflect the type of habitat in which they are living. The hares have a strategy which enables them to process food twice, hence utilizing protein made available by fermentation in the gut. This process is carried out in the forestomach of ruminates. In hares it takes place in their very large caecum. Following fermentation, nutrient rich faecal pellets are formed which are consumed directly from the anus. This process is known as caecotropy. Thus, the familiar hard pellets deposited by hares are actually the remains of food that have passed through the animal's gut twice.

Although it is considered to be almost ubiquitous throughout the country, there is a lack of information about the status of the Irish hare. In Europe, *Lepus timidus* is protected under Article six of the Bern Convention (the Convention of the conservation of European wildlife and natural habitats) and is listed in Annex V of the EU "Habitats Directive". In Ireland, the hare is a quarry species, hunted in an open season from November until March. Live hares are also taken from the wild for use in enclosed coursing meetings (the coursing season extends from the end of September until the end of February). The surviving hares are then re-released back into the countryside. It is not known how such exploitation affects populations and because a comprehensive numerical survey has never been completed, there is no baseline data which can be used as a basis for monitoring widespread population dynamics.

Hare populations can and do respond rapidly to habitat changes. Small modifications, such as the provision of small areas of uncultivated ground for shelter, and the availability of short stock-free pasture, can help to increase hare number on farmland. In areas where hare numbers have dropped, strict controls on the removal of hares can allow populations to re-establish themselves.