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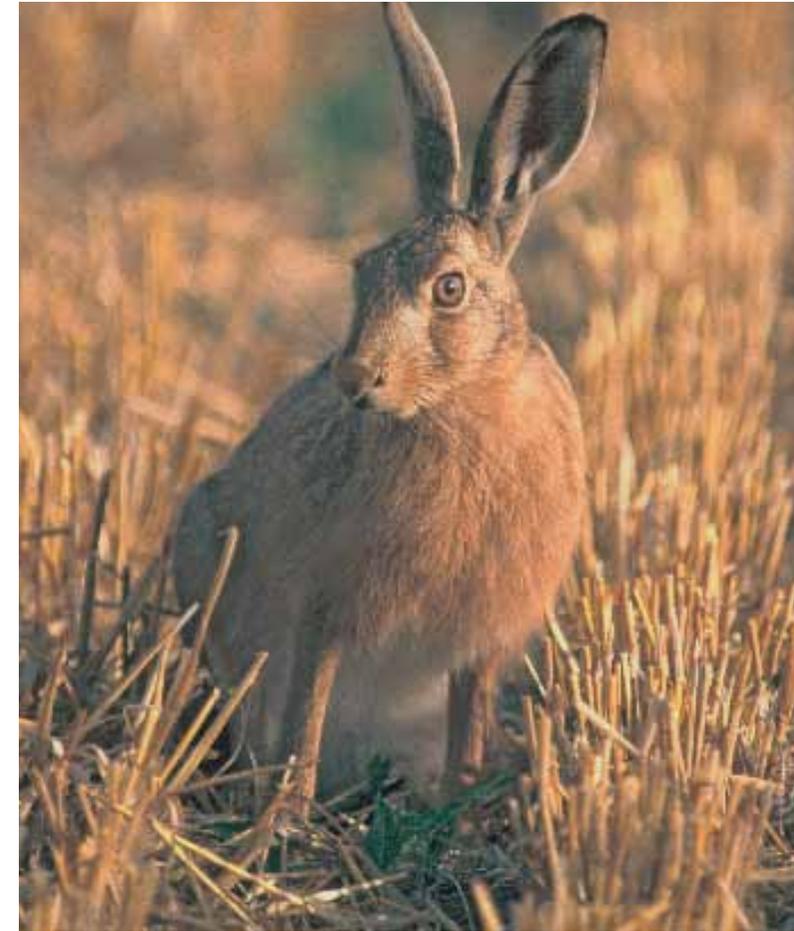
The British Brown Hare

Lepus europaeus

The Brown hare is thought to have moved eastwards from the steppes of Asia, as man cleared the forests for farming during the Neolithic period. One theory put forward is that they arrived in Britain when it was still joined to Europe by a land bridge, before sea levels rose. An opposing theory is that they were introduced to Britain by the Romans in the 1st century AD. A third theory put forward makes both the other two plausible: that they died out during the last Ice Age and were re-introduced by the Romans. Fossil evidence shows that Brown hares were certainly present in Britain two thousand years ago. They were



Left
A Brown hare in an open stubble field needs to be vigilant



Left
In the thirty years after World War II, the Brown hare population fell by approximately 75%

Fluctuations in Brown hare populations

Brown hare numbers peaked in the 19th century. In *Rural Rides* by William Cobbett, published in 1830, he described seeing “an acre of hares” on Salisbury Plain in the October of 1822. On being disturbed they had gathered together like a flock of sheep. It is thought the population of Brown hares at this time was about 4 million.

A dramatic decline in Brown hare numbers occurred at the end of the 19th century. In 1880 the *Ground Game Act* permitted tenants to kill the hares on their land. It is interesting to note that in *Baily's Magazine of Sports and Pastimes* May 1906, a Mr Alan R. Haig Brown wrote an article deploring the inadequacies of the *Ground Game Act* in not providing hares with a close season.

Even a hundred years ago he commented on the fact that

Dry Tastes

Hares do not flourish in the wetter areas of Britain. They thrive best on light, dry land such as covers parts of Yorkshire, East Anglia, Berkshire, Oxfordshire, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire



A Future for the Hare



The Brown hare has suffered a substantial decline since the middle of the last century. It is estimated that the present population of Brown hares is between 800,000 and one million.

For monitoring purposes, attempts are made to count hares in the spring but it is very difficult to do because of the creature's nocturnal habits and its highly effective camouflage. One way this can be done is to search one kilometre squares by walking diagonally across them and counting the hares that are flushed. An alternative method is known as 'night driven transects' which involves lamping the hares after dark with a million-candle power spotlight from a slow-moving vehicle across a fixed area over a period of several nights. The count is probably more accurate by this method. Thermal imaging and night vision equipment can play an increasingly important part in studying such a nocturnal animal.

Researchers also rely on records kept by the official coursing

Five newly-born Brown hare leverets (an exceptionally large litter) which were discovered on the verge of a well-used country lane by David Mason. The doe splits the leverets up within hours of birth to maximise their chances of avoiding predation, which makes this photograph all the more remarkable