

# Hares and Rabbits



Now is the time to look for hares. Early morning or dusk are good, when the hares are charging ('haring') around and sparring with each other. The interactions may be from a male (buck) trying to guard a female (doe), or more often between an unreceptive female and an amorous male. This is when we can see the 'boxing', when they stand up on their hind legs and seem to be punching at each other. Hares are still quite abundant on the Downs and on the fields at the foot of the Downs. North towards the railway they get increasingly scarce and are rarely recorded northwards from the village. They are a grassland animal, but prefer arable areas, especially small scale mixed arable. They also need some permanent cover. They may rest up in woodland and shelter belts, especially in the winter. They are much larger than rabbits, with longer limbs, longer black-tipped ears and an overall russet colour.

For most of the day hares lay up in a shallow scrape (or 'form') and it is here that they will have their young (or 'leverets'). While that might seem to leave them vulnerable to predators and the weather, they do have strategies to avoid such problems, including their running skills, and it does mean that unlike rabbits, that live in permanent nests in a burrow, hares don't carry large flea populations.

Hare populations have decreased, enormously over the last 100 years, but the current population trends are uncertain. They have some protection under EU and UK legislation, and it is a Priority Species under the UK Biodiversity Framework. Nevertheless, local police Wildlife Liaison Officers consider that hare coursing in this area is a major area of wildlife crime but very difficult to deal with. Another problem for hares is European Brown Hare Syndrome, a virus-borne disease that first appeared in UK in c.1990.

I know there are people in the village who have never seen a hare and perhaps, if there is interest, we could organise a little 'expedition' to look for them.

Our other local lagomorph (the Order to which rabbits and hares belong is the Lagomorpha) is, of course, the rabbit. Still very common but I don't think anything like as common as it was say 30 years ago. Writing in this same magazine in December 1994 about buzzards starting to breed locally, I wrote

that buzzards 'do not have to do very much; all a buzzard has to do is to wake up in the morning, fall off its perch and it will probably hit a rabbit! After that it's got nothing to do for the rest of the day'. I don't think that is true any more, although I don't see any decline (but maybe some stabilisation) of buzzard populations and we now have red kites also making their way into our territory.

The rabbit is much more widespread around here than the hare, but is restricted by its habit of digging burrows (often communal groups of burrows, forming a 'warren') and so is not so well established in the flatter clay areas. It is a major prey for some of our larger birds of prey and foxes, and road casualties provide for a wider group of bird species. With the introduction of Myxomatosis in the 1950s it was thought that they might almost disappear, but they hung on and while the disease is still present and cycles in the rabbit population with good years and bad years (being spread by those rabbit fleas), there were still large populations and evidence of increased resistance to this disease. Now rabbits face another introduced viral disease, Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease (RHD) or Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD), first identified in the UK in 1992 and now widespread.

Well, I didn't set out to write about pests and diseases, it's just the way it worked out, but it is quite an important issue at present, not just for these animals, but also for the impact that their reduced grazing may have on maintaining the chalk grassland that is so important for so many plant (and insect) species.

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