

The Brown Hare:

Lepus europaeus



Identification of the Brown Hare is relatively easy, hares being larger than rabbits, with longer legs and much longer black tipped ears. Parishioners living in the south of the railway are probably well aware that we have hares in Plumpton but they are a far rarer sight in the north of the village.

The Brown Hare's native range extends from Northern Europe into Western Asia and, as some of you will know, it's not native to Britain but was introduced in the Iron Age. It is viewed as an animal of open arable areas and, while it has evolved the excellent senses and speed endurance suited to such habitats, it actually occurs more widely. Their nocturnal and often solitary nature makes it much easier for us to spot them in big, open fields.

Hare populations are dropping across Europe, with a marked decline since the 1960s. The primary cause has been the change in land use on farms. Hares don't hibernate or store large quantities of body fat so need a constant year-round food supply. Mixed farms with their patch work of habitats and year-round available food resources have been replaced by intensive specialised units. The loss of hay meadows (95% decline) and hedgerows (>120,000 miles), coupled with the switch to silage and autumn sown arable crops have decreased habitats, food resources and pose new risks from machinery.

Hares typically shelter through the day in a 'form', a depression in the ground or grass, emerging at dawn and dusk to forage. Their diet consists mainly of grasses and herbs but includes tree buds/twigs and bark. They will eat arable crops, particularly in the winter.

Though largely solitary animals, they come together in the spring to mate and perform courtship rituals. The classic image of boxing hares is not two males but rather a female (the one doing the boxing) letting a male know that she is not yet receptive for mating. Hares can breed at any time of year with each female having four litters averaging four young per year. Leverets are born with their eyes open, fully furred and they are independent at three weeks!

Given their impressive turn of speed (up to 50kph), adult hares rarely fall prey to natural predators. They are most vulnerable as leverets when foxes,

buzzards, stoats, owls and cats take their toll. But, while evolution has equipped them against natural predation, they are very vulnerable to road traffic, silage-making operations and illegal coursing activities.

Hares feature heavily in mythology, and not just in Europe; many ancient cultures around the world had hares woven into their mythologies. This usually involved the moon, fertility and cunning. However many of the Native American tribes actually revered the Great Hare, Michabo or Manitou, as their common ancestor.

As ever, please let us have your Parish hare sightings. You can contact us at plumptonwildlife@gmail.com

JW