



The original Easter bunny

Myths surround the 'mad March hare' but its future is under threat and people are being asked to take part in a survey to record its appearances

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It has been said that before her first battle against the Romans, warrior Queen Boudicca released a hare from the folds of her dress to divine the outcome of the fight. Observing the path of its escape, the omen was good. Boudicca and her army marched on Colchester and London, and her defiance shocked the Roman world. Hundreds of years later, Napoleon Bonaparte led his Grande Armée towards the Russian border. A startled hare ran between the legs of Napoleon's horse causing him to fall, he remounted in silence. For Napoleon the omen was bad, tens of thousands of soldiers died in this misadventure into Russia.

Whether a good omen or an evil spirit, brown hares are shrouded in myth and mystery. They are athletic, as 'mad as March hares' and elusive with an uncanny knack of merging into a seemingly featureless landscape of open fields. The history of the brown hare in the English countryside is a story of confusions and contradictions.

In folklore, myth and modern culture, the distinction between hares and rabbits is often unclear. The original Easter bunny was in fact a hare. The association with eggs is just a simple misunderstanding of why leverets appear out of nowhere. In times past when people came across nests filled with eggs in open fields, they believed they would hatch into young hares or leverets. Born eyes open, fully furred and active, leverets receive little parental care and are left during the day. Coming across leverets, out in the fields sheltering in shallow depressions that look remarkably like a lapwings nest, it seemed as if they had appeared from eggs.

Hares and rabbits are superficially similar, they are close relatives. Brer Rabbit and Bugs Bunny have the long ears, long legs and speed of a hare, and are in fact North American Jack Rabbits – a species of hare rather than rabbit. Next time you see a rabbit on the silver screen, look carefully and see if it looks more like a rabbit or a hare (try the car-

toon version of *Watership Down*, Frank the Bunny from the cult film *Donnie Darko* or even Jimmy Stewart's invisible friend Harvey).

You often hear the phrase, 'you'll know it when you see it' and with hares this couldn't be more true. Brown hares are athletic, sleek and more agile than rabbits. They have powerful, long hind legs and long ears that are tipped with black. Somehow they seem wilder. Unlike the underground living rabbits, hares stay above ground. They are predominantly nocturnal and their hideaway during the day is a shallow depression, scraped in the ground, known as a form. Here, they lie motionless, ears pressed flat against their bodies, looking like a clod of earth. Hares will also retreat into hedgerows and woodland edges during the day, coming out at dusk to graze on young shoots of grasses and herbs, as well as cereal and root crops.

Sitting in their form seems a fairly reckless place to be but hares are remarkably adept at evading predators. For a large animal, their camouflage is impressive and due to the positioning of their eyes on the sides of their heads, hares have an almost 360° field of vision. They can also detect smells over great distances and their long ears give them excellent hearing, so their chances of spotting a predator are high. Often they lie still and sit tight when danger approaches, only running away at the last minute.

Running isn't the right word for a speeding hare, as anyone who has witnessed a hare racing across a field at full pelt will testify. This, the fastest mammal found in the UK with phenomenal powers of acceleration, can clock up speeds of 45mph (70kph). Speed, camouflage and acute senses are enough against most opponents that hares come across. Although like hedgehogs curling into a ball just before the car speeds over, sitting tight when a large piece of agricultural machinery approaches isn't always the best option. Foxes do prey on hares, particularly on



vulnerable leverets but only rarely will a fox surprise an adult hare and kill it.

Usually solitary animals, hares really come into their own in early Spring with their famed 'March madness'. It's a time when hares are most obvious to us and most oblivious to us watching them. Mad March hares haven't succumbed to a period of insanity, this is their energetic courtship with acrobatics, chases and fights. Rapid chases occur as dominant males drive away rivals and 'boxing' when females rebuff over-amorous males. Breeding actually occurs for most of the year and like the rabbit, hares are often associated in myth and folktales with fertility. But between March to April, food is more plentiful and their courtship behaviour easier to see in the short vegetation.

In a strange contradiction the hare is classed as 'game' and a species in need of conservation. Their population has declined significantly, perhaps by as much as seventy-five per cent in the UK since the 1960s. This pattern of decline has occurred in other European countries, raising concerns about the hare's future. Brown hares are classed as a 'priority' species in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. This plan is the blueprint for conservation action for our rare and endangered species, and for those whose populations have plummeted from once great heights. Concern for the brown hare is such that there are targets laid out for its conservation yet it remains legal to shoot and hunt it.

Across Europe hares are shot for sport. Hares do damage crops and the Ground Game Act 1880 allows farmers to kill hares as pests at any season of the year. Until February of this year, hares were also hunted with dogs in the UK. The Hunting with Dogs Bill, which bans fox hunting, also bans hare coursing. Previously, hare coursing without the landowners' permission was a poaching offence and illegal coursers were attracted

to Lincolnshire from across the UK. This new legislation may help put a stop to these illegal activities.

The reasons for the decline of hares are complex but do involve modern arable farming methods. Hares do not hibernate or store appreciable amounts of fat in their bodies so need a constant supply of food throughout the year. The loss of habitat diversity in the agricultural landscape and intensification of agriculture removes food sources at vital times of year. Practises such as the conversion of grassland to arable crops and changing in cropping regimes are likely to have had an impact.

Brown hares are so much part of the Lincolnshire landscape and it's hard to imagine the county without them. They appear to be common and are seen in many of our fields around the county but are hares found in all areas of the county? Are there hotspots of hares or areas where they are absent? We just don't know. The Lincolnshire Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership is launching a survey to try to determine the population status and distribution of hares across the historic county of Lincolnshire (including North and North-East Lincolnshire). A similar survey was carried out in 2001, but the outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease prevented access to much of the countryside and limited the value of the results. This new survey will build on those results and give a more complete picture.

This spring, if you see a hare, pause for a moment and enjoy watching its antics, make a note of where you are and take part in the Lincolnshire Brown Hare Survey. Remember this animal, infamous for being outwitted by Aesop's wily tortoise, is the one that threw Napoleon from his horse.

Survey forms are available from the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, Banovallum House, Manor House Street, Horncastle, Lincolnshire LN9 5HF, telephone 01507 526667, email: biodiversity@lincstrust.co.uk