

Haring around



Lindsay Quayle explores the challenging lives of Scotland's brown and mountain hares and explains why spring is the ideal season to spot these charismatic animals

Brown hares in springtime
© Mark Hamblin/2020VISION

As spring heralds an awakening in the natural world and many of us venture out again, it is the perfect time to catch a glimpse of animals that have kept a low profile over the Scottish winter, including two of our most colourful herbivores: brown and mountain hares.

Found throughout much of mainland Scotland, the larger brown hare with its russet coat, pale belly and long, black-tipped ears and tail is characterfully 'mad' in March – the peak of its early breeding season.

Bounding into life, these lithe members of the Lagomorpha family – to which rabbits also belong – are commonly spotted zigzagging across open fields and woodland edges.

Their elaborate courtship makes brown hares especially visible in springtime. Leaping and chasing, kicking and biting are all part of the romance ritual for these male jacks and female jills. Farmland and moors become arenas for brief but dramatic 'boxing' matches in which sparring hares stand tall on their powerful hind legs, using their front paws to pull at their opponent's fur.

Although skirmishes do break out between

“Leaping and chasing, kicking and biting are all part of the romance ritual for these male jacks and female jills.

competing jacks, it's typically females rebuffing the advances of amorous males at the centre of these spring contests. Slightly larger and heavier than the males, jills use these vigorous challenges to test a potential mate's endurance; those with stamina and strength stand a greater chance of being accepted as a mate.

Once the courtship is complete, brown hares, like their mountain cousins, withdraw to the comfort of their solitary scrapes or 'forms' – shallow depressions made in the bare earth, grass or heather. Females gestate for around 50 days, giving birth to between one and four young (leverets) in each of her

annual litters – up to four for browns and three for the smaller mountain species.

But maternal attention is very light touch for the leverets which are born fully furred, mobile and with their eyes wide open. Once leverets have been deposited into the safety of a form, their mother deflects any attention from lurking predators by returning just once daily at dusk to feed her young. And after just four weeks, they're on their own in the world to contend with the many challenges posed by nature and humans.

Changing fortunes

For the brown hare, fortunes have changed dramatically over the centuries. When first introduced by the Celts in the Iron Age, they were held in the highest regard – revered as gods even, together with rabbits and chickens. Historical evidence shows they were buried delicately and intact, their religious associations deeming them far too special to eat.

Over time, however, perceptions changed. Hare populations expanded, they were farmed as livestock by the Romans and hunted more

widely for sport and meat in the centuries to follow, most notably by the Victorians and Edwardians.

Despite their impressive survival instincts, which include their trademark 'freezing' when under threat and ability to escape on giant paws at speeds of up to 45mph, their numbers began to plummet.

The demise of brown hares over the past century is linked closely with changes in farming practices too, with intensive and specialised crop production – and a focus on livestock and dairy farming – creating a landscape far less biodiverse for these year-round browsers. The reduction in seasonal cover for a species reliant on camouflage also left hares more exposed to the predatory attention of foxes, stoats and birds of prey.

Thankfully, falling numbers did not go unnoticed. Brown hares were classified as a Priority Species in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan in the late 1990s, with further intervention making it illegal in Scotland from 2011 to kill, injure or take a brown hare without a licence during the closed season (1 February to 30 September).

Mountain dwellers

While brown hare numbers now appear to have stabilised, the same cannot be said for Scotland's native mountain hare population, which continues to see a downward curve.

Our only true Arctic mammal, it is estimated that 99% of the UK's mountain hares are found



Brown hare stretching
© Andrew Parkinson/2020VISION

in Scotland, typically on heather moorland at 300-400m above sea level. Like their larger relatives at lower altitudes, they live a mostly solitary life above ground, only gathering on leeward slopes to shelter or feed when conditions are at their harshest.

Hardy, timid and, some may say, spiritual, this species has captivated generations of wildlife enthusiasts. "Spending time with mountain hares is a real privilege," explains wildlife photographer Karen Miller, whose time spent photographing the animals throughout the Highlands was documented in a recent short film, *Finding Bo*.

"I have so much respect for them having to withstand all that the Scottish weather throws at them with little in the way of protection. When I find a hare I can approach and sit with, it is such a thrill – even when it doesn't do very much, just sharing its space is incredible."

Mostly sedentary during daytime, mountain hares, like browns, are primarily crepuscular, becoming more active at dusk. They feast on heather and grasses, or nibble the bark of young trees and shrubs. And when all that feels too much, they have



A mountain hare known as Bo that so captured photographer Karen Miller © Karen Miller

▶ the fallback of what Miller calls the “lazy meal” option: highly nutritious, partly digested food in the form of cecotropes – their own droppings at the first stage of digestion.

Climate challenges

Renowned in Celtic folklore as one of only a few animals that shapeshifting females (or witches) could transform into, this iconic species is celebrated today for its own seasonal trickery: the transformation of their coat from mousey brown to fluffy, bright white.

Mountain hares respond to falling temperatures and waning sunlight by moulting in late autumn. The greyish-brown fur that allows them to roam inconspicuously through moorland vegetation in the summer is replaced with a thicker, more insulated white fleece – only their distinctive, black-tipped ears remain unaltered.

Such a transformation offers ideal protection from the elements and camouflage against the snowy, mountain landscape. Or so you would think. “Warm, wet winters mean the hare’s thick winter pelages, designed for staying warm, become water-logged and can lead to hypothermia and illness,” notes Miller.

Temperamental Scottish winters with fewer days of snow cover also mean that bright white hares become more, rather than less,

visible to predators, especially on gloomy upland days. Catching a glimpse of a white mountain hare once the snow has melted in the spring is a moment to treasure – but spotting them easily through the winter months is a double-edged sword given the wider context of climate change.

Fluctuating temperatures aside, habitat loss, the shooting of mountain hares for sport and, more latterly, intensive culling by land managers for disease control has undoubtedly taken its toll.

With mountain hares playing a vital role in Scotland’s upland ecosystem – not least as a key prey species for golden eagles – the Scottish Wildlife Trust, together with a host of other nature conservation organisations, has long called for a ban on the unlicensed culling of mountain hares. But while greater legal protection in Scotland was eventually introduced in 2021, making it illegal to intentionally kill or injure mountain hares at any time without a licence, large scale mountain hare culls continue on some grouse moors, leading to renewed calls to further safeguard populations.

Ongoing monitoring

Although now enjoying a degree of protection across Scotland, capturing data to understand population numbers is not an easy task.

Mountain hares are almost all confined to remote upland areas of the Highlands and Islands – including the Trust’s Ben Mor Coigach estate – where monitoring their abundance and distribution with real accuracy is a significant challenge.

A long-term project involving volunteer nature enthusiasts and citizen scientists, however, could be part of the solution. Walkers exploring the Scottish uplands are being asked to participate in a volunteer mountain hare survey, recording any hare sightings via a free Mammal Mapper app developed by The Mammal Society.

For a species whose population naturally fluctuates in nine-year cycles, this vital monitoring will help the Trust and others track Scotland’s mountain hare communities, helping to secure a positive future for this most cherished inhabitant of our mountains. ■

For more on the Mammal Mapper app, visit mammal.org.uk/current-research/mammal-mapper-free-app or scan the QR code.

Lindsay Quayle is a freelance writer based in the Scottish Borders



We are proud to stock
earthborn
Beautifully different paint

THIS IS MY HAPPY PLACE

Claypaint in Hippo Hooray and Daisy Chain

13 Ratcliffe Terrace, Causewayside, Edinburgh, EH9 1SX
0131 661 5553 info@bruach.com www.bruach.com
Local independent business. Please find us on social media.

BRUACH
FINISHING & DECORATIVE SUPPLIES

New opening hours for 2025:
Tue - Fri 9.30am - 5.30pm, Sat 10am - 3.30pm

GENERAL FINISHES ENDURO Rubio MONOCOAT Fleas earthborn Beautifully different paint

wildflower seed packets
& meadow mixes

www.scotiaseeds.co.uk
0 1 3 5 6 6 2 6 4 2 5
Mavisbank, Farnell, Brechin, DD9 6TR

MAKE SPACE FOR NATURE WITH
SCOTIA SEEDS
wildflowers of scotland

FARMING FOR NATURE

MILK FOR YOU

FROM GRASS TO GLASS,
ORGANIC MAKES A DIFFERENCE

20+ DAIRY FARMS ACROSS SCOTLAND ARE NOW CERTIFIED ORGANIC. WHEN YOU BUY ORGANIC, YOU CAN BE SURE THAT YOUR MILK COMES FROM FARMS THAT PRIORITISE NATURE!

SCOTTISH ORGANIC Milk

WWW.SCOTTISHORGANICMILK.ORG

FIND US IN SUPERMARKETS, INDEPENDENT RETAILERS AND DIRECTLY FROM FARMS