



Essex
Biodiversity
partnership

*More than 40 partners working together
for the biodiversity of Essex*

*Hare today...
gone tomorrow*

Brown Hares and illegal coursing in Essex

WE NEED YOUR HELP

The Brown Hare

Over the past few decades, the Brown Hare, a once very common and widespread species, appears to have declined significantly throughout Europe.

In Britain, old estate game books in Victorian and Edwardian times recorded many more hares being shot than in recent years. Bag records directly reflect abundance so we can conclude that hares are now far less abundant than three generations ago. It has been estimated that numbers have dropped by about 75 per cent since the second world war, with substantial declines since the early 1960s.

As a result of this national decline, the Brown Hare was one of the first animals to be considered for a UK and Essex Biodiversity Action Plan.

Local status

Hares are present in all the districts of Essex, with good numbers recorded in the 1990s in the northwest and in coastal areas such as the Dengie and Foulness. The species was once, however, much more abundant. Hares were considered very common in north and mid-Essex in the 1950s, with large numbers killed on shoots. For example, a day's bag was in the region of 400-500 hares in north Essex in 1961/62. We know now that the area with the most noticeable decline is south Essex.

Help us...

The lack of systematically collected data makes assessment of the population size difficult. We want to find out more about the true distribution and status of the species across Essex and to understand some of the current factors affecting the species.

The threat of illegal hare coursing is believed to be a major issue for landowners. **We would like to hear your views on the brown hare and illegal coursing in Essex.**

Please fill in and return the questionnaire enclosed.

Biological diversity – or 'biodiversity' – is the variety of life on earth and includes all plants and animals, together with the soils, rocks and water on which they depend.

Ecology

Brown Hares like open country and are a farmland species indicative of a habitat-rich rural environment.

How many hares on a farm?

Hares are mainly nocturnal, spending most of the day lying in a shallow depression in the ground digesting the previous night's forage. They move out to feed in the open field at night. Most hares that are seen in daylight have been disturbed, while the majority pass unnoticed, hidden in even the shortest of arable crops. The easiest way to assess numbers is a spotlight count.

What do hares like best?

Hares move over wide areas and are best suited to a "patchwork quilt" landscape of cereals, root crops, and grass. The modern Essex landscape is no longer this varied, being predominantly arable. However, there is suitable farmland for hares. They are most abundant in arable areas with cereal farming, where woods, hedges and shelterbelts provide cover and resting areas.

Factors affecting hares

Brown hares do best in diverse landscapes, as this provides a continuous range of food throughout the year. Increasingly, grassland is being converted to arable. The trend towards large blocks of winter cereals means food is short during the summer, when crops are tall, woody and inedible. Grazing for adults and leverets is then confined to field boundaries, tracks and roadsides. Larger fields have a small area of field edge per acre, and the move towards bigger fields and towards organizing fields in blocks compounds this effect. Providing more grass in the form of wide strips of grass or patches of pasture is one of the best ways to improve habitat on arable farms.

Living in the open, hares are exposed to predators like foxes. They depend on camouflage and on remaining still in shallow depressions while using their huge ears and eyes to detect predators before they are seen themselves. Once spotted, hares rely on speed to put distance between themselves and danger. Foxes only rarely surprise and kill adult hares, but



do kill leverets. Our modern landscape with its lack of cover could make hares, and especially leverets, more prone to fox predation than traditional farming.

Hares dislike pasture with high densities of livestock. They are therefore found in fields without stock or very light grazing. As farmers move stock, so hares move too. Increasingly silage, rather than hay, is being made and this more intensive grass management will increase leveret mortality as a result of grass-cutting machinery and predation.

In warm, dry springs and summers leverets survive well, but if they are wet and cold breeding success is poor. In some areas, local disease outbreaks can have an impact on populations, as can road casualties.

Hares can cause damage to horticultural and agricultural crops and it is legal to kill hares as pests at any season of the year. Organised shoots do occur, but these usually take place where hares are numerous and in most cases are not a significant threat to the species.

Illegal hare coursing is also recognised as a problem. Don't let poaching jeopardise the hare population. Contact the local police Wildlife Crime Officer to get help on this.

What you can do to help hares

There are measures land managers can take to help increase hare survival. Many of these are grant-aided through agri-environment schemes.

- Break up blocks of cereal as much as possible.
- Provide more grass on arable farms for summer grazing. Run wide strips of grass across open fields or have patches of pasture.
- Hares need quiet, undisturbed cover to raise leverets. On livestock farms, leave areas uncut and ungrazed for leverets to hide in.
- When making silage, cut the field from the centre outwards rather than from the outside in, so hares can escape the machinery into neighbouring fields.
- Don't shoot hares in late winter unless you are sure crops are being damaged.
- Have ploughed or rough cultivated areas left for spring crops for hares to jug (sleep).
- Please fill in and return the questionnaire.

Name Date

Address

..... Postcode

Telephone E-mail

What type of farm do you manage?

Mixed arable Cereal Livestock and cereal

Other (please specify)

Have you got hares on your farm?

Yes No

If yes, do you know how many?

Number of hares Size of farm Don't know

Have you had hares on your farm in the past?

Yes No

If yes, do you think hare numbers are increasing or decreasing on your farm?

Increasing Decreasing

Approximate number of hares

1995 1985 1975 Other

Why do you think they are increasing or decreasing?

.....
.....

Would you be prepared to count the hares on your farm as part of an organised survey, or have someone help you do it?

Yes No

Have you had illegal hare coursers on your land?

Yes No

If yes, when and how often?

.....
.....

Did you contact the police about the illegal hare coursers?

Yes No

Do you control hare numbers on your land?

Yes No

If, yes, what is the main reason for the control?

Crop damage Deter coursers

Other (please specify)

Is it an organised shoot?

Yes No

Is there anything else you would like to add?

.....
.....
.....

Please tick here if you do **not** want us to store your contact details on our database

Biodiversity Coordinator, Essex Wildlife Trust, Joan Elliot Visitor Centre,
Abbotts Hall Farm, Great Wigborough, COLCHESTER CO5 7RZ

Thank you for taking part in this survey

The legal status of hares

The Brown Hare is not protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, but is listed as Game under the Game Act 1831 (amended 1970).

The Ground Game Act 1880 authorises owners or occupiers of land to take hares and rabbits. However, the Hares Act 1848 prohibits the shooting of hares at night by any person other than a landowner or occupier, or a person authorised under Ground Game Act 1880. The Hares Preservation Act 1892 creates a closed season for the sale of hares during the breeding season, (1 March - 31 July inclusive). Under sections 2 and 3 of this act it is an offence to sell or expose for sale a hare during this closed season.



Hare coursing

Probably the biggest problem for landowners and occupiers in respect of hares is illegal coursing. Hare coursing is a test of speed and agility of a greyhound, lurcher or similar dog against a hare. These dogs hunt by sight alone, therefore large open fields with no hedges are the desired terrain. The sport is not currently illegal, but it is an offence to take a hare on a Sunday.

However, if the person(s) undertaking the sport are trespassing then an offence under the Game Act 1831 is committed. The full offence is **Trespassing in pursuit of Game** and it is these three highlighted points that need to be proved before a successful conviction can be secured at court. Witnesses to this offence do not have to witness the person(s) actually course a hare, simply lined out and walking across a field is sufficient. Large amounts of money can be wagered on a single course.

If person(s) are seen under the circumstances described, do **not** approach them but ring the Police **immediately** giving the precise location and any other details, ie. type of vehicle(s), index numbers, and number of persons coursing. For evidence purposes, in particular the identification of the person(s) involved, it is important that the Police can deal with them at the scene of the coursing. One final point, there is currently **no** power of arrest under the Game Act for this offence but other legislation may create a power of arrest under certain circumstances.



Contacts

Help with management

For more information on agri-environment schemes, contact:

Sarah Brockless, Agri-environment Scheme Advisor (Essex),
RDS, Defra, Eastbrook, Shaftsbury Road, Cambridge CB2 2DR.
Tel: 01223-533604 or e-mail sarah.brockless@defra.gov.gsi.uk

Rebecca Inman, Conservation Officer,
Essex FWAG, Writtle College, Lordship Road, Writtle CM1 3RR.
Tel: 01245-424233 or e-mail rebecca.inman@fwag.org.uk

Essex Police – Wildlife Crime Officer

Pc 1485 Barry Kaufmann-Wright
Force Wildlife Crime Officer,
Essex Police

Police Station
Chelmsford Road
Hatfield Heath
Hertfordshire CM22 7BH

Essex Biodiversity partnership

Essex Biodiversity partnership is a group of more than 40 nature conservation organisations, statutory agencies, voluntary interest groups, businesses, community groups and local authorities working together for the biodiversity of Essex.

Funding members:



Supporting members: Basildon District Council • Braintree District Council • Brentwood Borough Council • British Trust for Conservation Volunteers • Butterfly Conservation • Castle Point Borough Council • Colchester Borough Council • Conservators of Epping Forest • Dedham Vale & Stour Valley Project • Environment Agency • Epping Forest District Council • Essex & Suffolk Water • Essex Amphibian and Reptile Group • Essex Bat Group • Essex Birdwatching Society • Essex Estuaries Initiative • Essex Field Club • Essex Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group • Forestry Commission • Game Conservancy Trust • Havering Borough Council • Lee Valley Regional Park • Peoples Trust for Endangered Species • Rochford District Council • Royal Horticultural Society • Royal Society for the Protection of Birds • Southend Borough Council • Tendring District Council • Thames Chase Community Forest • Thames Estuary Partnership • The National Trust • The Suffolk Coasts & Heaths Unit • Thurrock Council • Uttlesford District Council • Writtle College.

Essex Biodiversity partnership, c/o Joan Elliot Visitor Centre
Abbots Hall Farm, Great Wigborough
Colchester, Essex CO5 7RZ
www.essexbiodiversity.org.uk

Claire Cadman
Biodiversity Coordinator
01621 862981
clairec@essexwt.org.uk

Mark Iley
Biodiversity Project Officer
01621 862975
marki@essexwt.org.uk