

# Hares and Rabbits

Hares and rabbits are mammals which belong to the family called leporids. Along with pikas (a small animal found in Asia) they form the order of Lagomorphs. Lagomorphs are distinctive in that they have a second set of incisors.

Rabbits and hares are similar in some ways but different in others. What they both have in common is that they are prey animals that rely on hiding or running to evade predators.

Standing upright on their strong hind legs, their long ears and panoramic eyesight alert them to danger. Adult hares are about twice the size of rabbits but young hares may easily be confused with rabbits.

All leporids feed on vegetation, such as grass and other plants, which has a relatively low food value. From this they must derive enough energy to keep warm, move rapidly and rear their young, which they achieve by frequent browsing.

Their teeth grow continuously to compensate for the constant wear and tear from nibbling plants into very small pieces.

To help them get as many nutrients as possible, leporids have two types of droppings.

One type consists of round fibrous balls, like the droppings we see in a field. The other type, called caecotrophs, look like a small bunch of shiny black grapes and contain important nutrients.

These appear after the food has first been digested and we hardly ever see these because the rabbit or hare eats them as they are produced. This may seem distasteful to some of us, but leporids must do this to remain nourished and healthy. Some religions forbid the eating of hares for this reason.

Hares and rabbits feature in the folklore and mythology of cultures throughout the world and Ireland is no exception.

When people first colonised Ireland after the ice age, they brought with them pagan gods. One of these was the moon goddess Eostre, who was worshiped in the spring. Some cultures could see the image of a hare (or rabbit) carry-



**An Irish Hare at Glenlark Nature Reserve in County Tyrone. (Photo: Mike Rendle)**

ing an egg on the moon's surface. The hare was believed to be the earthly form of Eostre, who gazed up at the moon that was her home.

This lore has not only given us the name of our present Easter holiday but also Easter eggs and the Easter bunny (originally the Easter hare!).

There are three

species of Leporid in Ireland; the Irish hare (*Lepus timidus hibernicus*), the brown hare (*Lepus europeaeus*, but sometimes referred to as *Lepus capensis*) and the rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*). Hares and rabbits have an important place in the island's biodiversity.

Read on to learn more about hares and rabbits in Ireland.

# Hares in Ireland

Brown hares were introduced to Ireland by landowners in the 19th century to supplement game species for hunting parties. These attempts had limited success because many hares died following their journey from Britain.

Also called the 'thrush' hare, this species survived in small pockets and although its present status is unknown, they are considered scarce.

There is no evidence that brown hares interbreed with, or threaten, our native Irish hares. The two species are hard to tell apart in the field and few confirmed recent sightings of brown hares exist.

The Irish hare is one of our true native mammals and is found only in Ireland. It is regarded as a distinct subspecies of the Mountain or Blue hare (*Lepus timidus*), which is found in Britain and Europe.

However, unlike its close relation, the Irish hare is found in most areas and is not just confined to mountain regions.

The fur of the moun-

tain hare turns white in winter but this is rarely observed in its Irish cousin. However, the coat of the Irish hare may vary in colour throughout the year, sometimes developing white patches. On rare occasions, all-white individuals have been recorded.

Larger than rabbits, Irish hares have black tips on the ears, white on both upper and lower surfaces of the tail and long back legs that give them a distinctive 'walk'.

Although hares may be found throughout Ireland from mountain-side to coastal grassland, they are most likely to be found in 'unimproved' areas of species-rich vegetation.

This provides not only food but also cover and shelter where they can lie up during the day out of sight of predators.

They do not live in burrows but in a 'nest' of flattened grass called a form.

The month of March is associated with hares, when females may be seen fending off or 'boxing' enthusiastic males.

Irish hares may



**An Irish Hare resting in a meadow. (Photo: Mike Brown)**

breed throughout most of the year, having two or three litters with an average litter size of two.

Leverets are born fully furred with eyes open. The mother hare 'hides' them in vegetation and returns only once each night to feed them. It is normal to see a leveret on its own and it should never be removed from the wild unless it is in imminent danger.

Weaned at six weeks, the youngster will be old enough to breed the following year.

The Irish hare population has undergone a dramatic decline over the last thirty years and numbers are low.

It is widely believed that changes in land

use and agriculture have contributed to their demise. Hares prefer unimproved land, which has become less abundant with modern farming practices.

Overgrazing, overstocking and increased production of silage all have a detrimental affect on hares and their habitat. Adults are sensitive to disturbance and the young may be killed by grass cutting.

Short vegetation and the removal of rushes, hedgerows and other cover leaves them at higher risk of predation. Some pesticides are known to be deadly to hares and other wildlife.

Although hares have been hunted and coursed for centuries, nowadays the majority of people believe that these activities are cruel.

There is evidence that coursing can cause high levels of stress in hares leading to sickness and death.

With numbers at dangerously low levels, every hare is precious and the provision of effective legal protection underpins other conservation measures.

# Rabbits in Ireland

Rabbits were introduced to Ireland by the Normans in the 12th century and are now common throughout the island. They were kept in enclosed warrens and exploited as a food supply.

Its Latin name, *cuniculus*, means underground passage and these adaptable animals may be found anywhere they can make burrows, although they avoid wet areas.

The general population of rabbits remains relatively stable although numbers fluctuate locally as a result of two virulent diseases, myxomatosis and viral haemorrhagic disease (VHD). These were introduced into wild rabbit populations to control their numbers.

Domestic rabbits are also vulnerable to both of these highly infectious diseases and owners can arrange effective vaccination for their pets at their local veterinary practice.

When numbers are high, they are often regarded as pests but they have a very important place in the food chain and make a major contribution to



**A rabbit at night. Rabbits live for about 1.5 years in the wild. (Photo: Mike Rendle)**

the diet of other species such as buzzards and stoats.

Well known for their ability to reproduce, they can have several litters each year from the age of around three months. With an average litter size of six, these high numbers are balanced by a 95% mortality rate in their first year and a life span of only 1.5 years (domestic rabbits may live 10 years or more).

Babies are born naked and blind in a special burrow, or stop, made by the doe. Weaned at four weeks, they leave this burrow to take their place in the rabbit community.

Their ability to breed has encouraged their use as a laboratory animal for testing products such as cosmetics, although animal

testing is becoming increasingly redundant in favour of more humane methods.

Although they have been domesticated for centuries, rabbits still retain many qualities of their wild ancestors and it is possible for a doe of any breed to give birth to a baby with the natural agouti fur colour.

Contrary to popular belief, rabbits do not make good children's pets. As prey animals, most do not like to be picked up and cuddled. They need plenty of space and a suitable environment.

The traditional rabbit hutch is outdated and does not allow a rabbit to exhibit natural behaviour. Often kept in isolation, these social animals prefer the company of their

own kind. Young rabbits are very difficult to sex accurately, which means that buying a pair of 'females' may lead to an unexpected (and unwanted) population explosion.

Juveniles are docile and submissive, but at around 3-6 months of age many become aggressive.

In the wild, rabbits become naturally competitive and aggressive as they mature - domestic rabbits are no different. Neutering will resolve many behavioural and breeding issues.

Diet is important to avoid common health problems. This means providing a constant supply of high fibre material such as hay or grass (not grass clippings from mowing the lawn). Rabbits are vulnerable animals and require a great deal of care and attention. They will require as much, if not more, commitment and work as any other family pet.

With a lifespan in captivity of more than ten years, rabbits should never be bought on impulse - there are plenty of rabbits in animal sanctuaries in need of good homes.

# Hares and Rabbits at a Glance

Hares	Rabbits
Widespread but numbers in serious decline.	Widespread and common but numbers fluctuate.
Adults weigh 2.5 - 3.5 Kg.	Adults weigh 1.5 - 2 Kg.
Hares live above ground in a patch of flattened vegetation called a form.	Rabbits live below ground in a series of burrows called a warren.
Hares prefer to eat certain types of vegetation.	Rabbits can adapt to different types of vegetation.
Hares do not breed in their first year.	Rabbits can breed from the age of three months.
Hares may breed throughout most of the year.	Rabbits breed between January and August.
A female will only have around 8 leverets per year in favourable conditions.	A female may have around 45 young in a year.
Born fully furred with eyes open. Hides in long grass and vegetation. Mother feeds only once at night with milk for around 6 weeks.	Born naked with eyes closed. Mother digs special burrow or 'stop' and returns once each night to feed with milk for around 4 weeks.
Young hares are called leverets and weigh around 120 grams at birth.	Young rabbits are called kittens or racks and weigh around 50 grams at birth.
Hares probably only live for about 3 years in the wild. Only 25% of leverets survive the first year.	Rabbits live for around 1.5 years in the wild. A mere 5% survive the first year.
Very little is known about the impact of disease on Irish hares, but stress can cause sickness and death.	Rabbits are susceptible to Myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD) both of which are usually fatal.

## Hare tracks

Direction of movement →



The tracks of hares can be distinguished from those of rabbits by their larger size (11-12 cm long).

## Rabbit tracks

Direction of movement →



At 6-9 cm in length, rabbit tracks are smaller than hares' and may be superimposed with fox prints as it stalks its prey.

## Further Reading

**An Irish Beast Book** James Fairley  
ISBN 0856403148

**A Basket of Weasels** James Fairley  
ISBN 0950262625

**Animals of Ireland** G D'Arcy  
ISBN 0862811996

**The Wild Rabbit** David Cowan  
ISBN 0713708999

**Mammals of Britain and Europe**  
Corbet & Ovenden  
ISBN 000219774X

## Website Links

**Irish hare website** [www.irishhare.org](http://www.irishhare.org)  
**Rabbit website** [www.rabbitsonline.org](http://www.rabbitsonline.org)  
**Campaign against coursing**  
[www.banbloodsports.com](http://www.banbloodsports.com)

**Hare and Rabbit Helpline** 08707 44 22 85

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