

FACT FILE: HARES

- Although many people think that hares are just another name for rabbits, they are actually their own individual species of animal. Hares are larger than rabbits and have longer ears.
- Hares are wild animals, while people will keep rabbits as house pets.
- A hare is a mammal. Hares give birth to their babies in open areas while rabbits give birth in burrows that are hidden. Hares are born fully covered in fur and with their eyes wide open.
- Hares can be found in Africa, Eurasia, North America, and some parts of Japan. They like to live in areas that have plenty of trees, bushes, and other vegetation that can hide them.
- They also like to have wide open space to run around.
- They are some of the fastest small mammals in the world, and can run at speeds of 45 miles per hour!
- Hares are herbivores, which means that they only eat plants. Their favorite food is grass, but they will also eat flowers, seeds, vegetables, and fruits.
- Hares are big and extremely fast, so they are not the first food that many predators choose. Some animals that do hunt hares are owls, hawks, and coyotes. Humans will also hunt them sometimes for food or sport.
- A group of hares is called a "husk", a "down" or a "drove"
- In stories like 'The Tortoise and the Hare', the hare is a trickster and ends up losing the race because he is too confident in his skills. In real life, hares are known to be calm and fairly shy.



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- Hare vs. Rabbit: Hares are often confused with rabbits, but they are different animals. Hares are generally larger with longer legs and ears. Unlike rabbits, hares are typically solitary and don't live in burrows.
- Swift Runners: Hares are known for their incredible speed and agility. They can run at speeds of up to 45 miles per hour (72 kilometers per hour) to escape predators.
- No Burrows: Unlike rabbits that live in burrows, hares make nests on the ground in grass or underbrush. These nests are called "forms."
- Nighttime Activity: Hares are primarily crepuscular, which means they are most active during dawn and dusk. This behavior helps them avoid predators while foraging for food.
- Herbivores: Hares are herbivores, meaning they eat plants. Their diet includes grasses, herbs, and shrubs. They are also known to engage in "coprophagy," which is the practice of eating their own feces to digest food more efficiently.
- Leaping Abilities: Hares are famous for their high and long leaps. They can jump as far as 3 meters (10 feet) in a single bound.
- Camouflage: Hares have fur that changes color with the seasons to help them blend in with their surroundings. In winter, their fur becomes white to match the snowy landscape, while in summer, it turns brown or gray.
- Ears and Hearing: Hares have large, sensitive ears that can swivel to detect sounds from all directions. This keen sense of hearing helps them detect predators.
- Predators: Hares have several natural predators, including foxes, coyotes, owls, and hawks. Their speed and agility are their primary defenses against these predators.
- Breeding: Hares have a high reproductive rate. They typically have litters of leverets (young hares) with around 2 to 4 leverets per litter. Leverets are born with their eyes open and are well-equipped to survive.
- Life Span: In the wild, hares typically have a shorter lifespan, living around 1 to 3 years. However, some captive hares have been known to live longer.
- Hare Myths and Folklore: Hares have been featured in various myths and folklore around the world. Queen Boudicca, who ruled the Iceni tribe at the time of the Roman conquest, was known to release a hare before a battle; she led her army in the same direction that the hare ran in, such was the trust placed in the importance of hares.
- Although we may be more familiar with the Easter bunny, the legend originally began with the Easter Hare and dates back to Anglo-Saxon times. The hare symbolised fertility and was connected to the pagan Anglo-Saxon goddess Eostre and the coming of spring.



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Different types of hares

Mountain hare

Mountain hares differ from brown hares in size and shape: they are more compact and smaller in stature than their brown hare cousins.

In the UK, the mountain hare is only found in habitats at 500m and it has etched out a successful living at this high altitude; they are content to eat a variety of foods so are better able to exist at high altitudes than brown hares, who are known to be fussy eaters.

They moult several times a year and in winter their pelage (coat) is white to provide camouflage, though their tail is white all year round. They are thought to be victims of excessive culling in Scotland due to the belief that they carry diseases that affect grouse chicks.

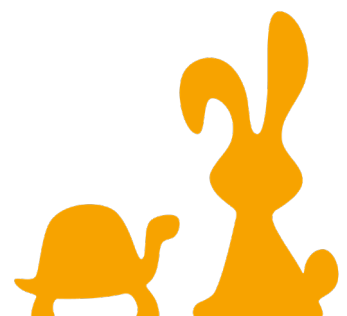
Irish hare

The Irish hare is the only species of hare native to Ireland. It is roughly the same size as the mountain hare and its coat, or pelage, varies (even within the same family group) from russet brown to light brown or blond.

Its fur does not usually moult to white in winter, as does the mountain hare, but it can get lighter or greyer.

The territory they inhabit varies from hills to the sea - an unlikely habitat, though there have even been reports that they sometimes graze on seaweed.

However, the Irish hare is more commonly found in areas of unimproved species-rich tall vegetation, such as rushes, as this provides food, shelter and a good hiding place from predators. Irish hares can be quite solitary creatures, with limited territory and a sparse population dispersal.



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Differences between hares and rabbits

- Food

Hares are fussy eaters, whereas rabbits are happy to eat a much wider variety of foods, so the two species do not often compete for food.

- Nests

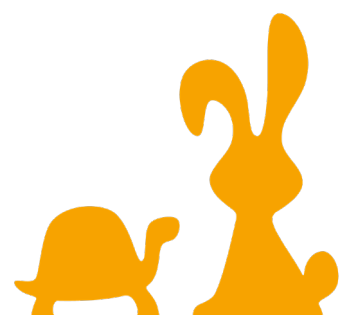
Rabbits live in warrens, which provide a safe place to hide from predators and to raise their young. They prefer to forage near to their warrens in case of sudden attack, and so, to ensure they don't have to venture too far, they have a varied and diverse diet. Hares, however, do not require the safety of a warren so they can afford to be fussy and invest their energy in seeking out more interesting food sources further away.

- Habitat

Hares can be found in a wider variety of habitats than rabbits. Rabbits and hares rarely cross paths and they tend not to interact with one another when they do.

- Features

Hares have longer ears and longer hind feet than rabbits. Hares have a larger heart and therefore a larger volume of circulating blood. Hares are born fully furred, whereas rabbits are born bald and grow their fur later. Hares' eyes have an orange iris; rabbits have a dark brown or almost black iris.



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Why are hares rare?

Hares are unable to thrive in big blocks of monoculture; for example, in the West Country, a landscape predominated by pasture for cattle, the hare is considered very rare. They thrive in Hampshire in areas where the countryside is more arable – a patchwork of crops and wider field margins that are managed as part of stewardship schemes.

Gamekeepers also inadvertently help the hare population by controlling foxes, as they would normally predate hares. Fox predation accounts for 75 to 100% of annual losses in hare populations in the south of England. The fox has the upper hand against young or sick hares.

Hares prefer open arable land and well-drained soil – large acres of land are ideal for them as they can sit in the middle and see danger approaching from any angle. 95% of hay meadows have been lost since the Second World War, contributing to habitat loss for a huge variety of species, including hares. 150,000 miles of hedgerow have been destroyed during the past 50 years, depriving hares of a vital source of food and shelter.

Hares are naturally inclined to eat wild plants rather than agricultural crops, although, due to the intensification of farming, they have adapted their diet.

Hares are on the BAP (Biodiversity Action Plan) priority species list, meaning that they are threatened by decline and extinction requiring urgent conservation action. They are second only to the water vole as the British mammal which has shown the greatest decline in the past century. Recent surveys show the brown hare has declined by more than 80% during the past 100 years, and the decline is ongoing. In some parts of Britain, such as the South-West, the brown hare is almost a rarity and may even be locally extinct.

Hares are renowned for their phenomenal powers of acceleration, reaching up to 45mph, yet they have a habit of ‘sitting tight’ to the ground when a predator approaches. This makes them vulnerable to being killed by farm machinery, particularly grass cutters, as they often do not move out of the way until the very last second, and sometimes too late.

Hare populations have suffered due to adverse weather conditions in recent years. Excessive wet and cold weather leads to leveret mortality as their fur gets continually wet but is unable to fully dry out.

A report by Dr Toni Bunnell in 2011 for the Eden TV natural history channel listed the brown hare as one of the UK species most at risk of extinction by 2050.

