

North Merseyside Biodiversity Action Plan

Brown Hare

Lepus Europaeus

Last revised: May 2008 Lead reviewer: Rick Rogers
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1 Current status

1.1 National

Whilst still a relatively common species, the brown hare has undergone a population decline from the end of the 19th century. A post-war increase in numbers was followed by a severe decline from the 1960s to 1980s when the population appeared to stabilise.

The first national hare survey carried out by Bristol University estimated the pre-breeding population to be around 800,000, approximately 20% of the Victorian era. The study concluded that the decline was faster and more severe in the western pastoral regions of the country.

Game bag figures indicate a decline in the number of hares shot between 1961 and 2004 across the UK but show a general increase between 1995 and 2004 in England. The decline across Wales appears to continue.

1.2 Local

There is no population estimate for North Merseyside. However, hares are commonly found on farmland throughout the area.

Consistent with national trends, populations are likely to have declined. Agri-environmental schemes have had a good take up, particularly in the north of St Helens Borough. This should assist with hare conservation.

1.3 Legal

The Brown hare is afforded limited protection under the Ground Game Act (1880) and Hares Protection Act (1911) and may not be offered for sale between March 1st and July 31st. This is to discourage shooting during the main breeding season.

The Hunting Act 2004 which came into force on 18th February 2005, made hunting hares with dogs illegal.

2 Current factors causing loss or decline

2.1 National

Increasingly intensive techniques designed to increase efficiency and maximise yields has resulted in a simplified agricultural landscape less favourable for hares. Changes

from spring to autumn sown crops and large-scale mono cropping can result in shortage of forage areas at certain times of the year.

Intensive livestock farming along with increased silage production at the expense of hay cropping causes high mortality amongst leverets due to earlier and more frequent cutting regimes. Hares tend to avoid stocked pasture as disturbance levels render them more liable to predation.

Persistent poaching can cause localised extinction.

2.2 Local

Current trends affecting population levels on Merseyside are unknown. However, data¹ suggests that in 2002 farm woodland had increased by 9.3% and set aside increased by 3.4%. This is likely to be of benefit to hare populations. Agri-environmental schemes should also be of benefit to hare numbers. The incidence of poaching is thought to be high and likely to suppress population levels.

Potential threats to hare populations include:

- Pressure for housing development within the current Green Belt leading to habitat fragmentation and reduced quality of the urban fringe. Whilst there are no current plans for Green Belt release this cannot be ruled out in the future.
- Reduction of compulsory set-aside to 0% in 2008.

Probable threats include:

- Expansion of equestrian sector reducing habitat diversity/habitat richness
- Illegal hunting with dogs or shooting
- Simplification of the agricultural landscape

3 Current action

Lancashire Wildlife Trust run a public participation hare survey project

Merseyside Wildlife Police Officer undertakes education of student officers and control room staff about wildlife legislation.

BioBank has produced a Brown Hare recording card and promotes recoding of hares.

4 Key habitats

Broadly, higher hare populations are positively correlated to habitat richness to a level of 11 habitats per km² in lowland Britain and do best in mixed-farm habitats. Positive habitat associations include hedgerows and farm woodlands in association.

¹ Environmental Monitoring Report, Merseyside Objective 1 2002-2006 Mott MacDonald.

5 SMART targets

Number	Type	Text	Date	Quantity	Units
BH1	Range	Maintain the Brown Hare's range across North Merseyside.	2015	100	Percent of baseline occupied tetrads
BH2	Population	Double the Brown Hare's spring population levels across North Merseyside.	2015	200	Population index

Target units and quantities for BH1 and BH2 will be specified with greater precision as and when efforts to get better baseline data on Brown Hares in Merseyside come to fruition (see proposed actions).

6 Proposed actions

6.1 Research and monitoring

Extend Wildlife Trust annual volunteer survey project across North Merseyside. (Action: LWT; BB) (Priority: High)

Encourage submission of casual records (Action: BB; MBG) (Priority: High)

Establish a voluntary repeatable annual 'questionnaire' survey for landowners. (Action: BB; MBG) (Priority: High)

Establish population size baseline for North Merseyside by 2010 through integrated population monitoring e.g. landowner questionnaire, 1km square surveys and formal recording. (Action: BB; LWT) (Priority: High)

Establish population distribution pattern across North Merseyside by 2010 through integrated population monitoring e.g. landowner questionnaire, 1km square surveys and formal recording. (Action: BB; LWT) (Priority: High)

Review SAP targets and establish aspirational population density and distribution levels by 2015. (Action: MBG) (Priority: High)

Establish factors (both positive and negative) affecting hare populations across North Merseyside by 2010 through landowner questionnaire. (Action: BB; MBG) (Priority: High)

Monitor effects of set-aside levels on hare populations. (Action: NE) (Priority: Medium)

6.2 Site safeguard

Ensure brown hare conservation issues are integrated into green infrastructure planning. (Action: LAs; TMF; MEAS) (Priority: High)

6.3 Land management

Promote hedgerow and farm woodland planting (where appropriate). (Action: TMF; FC; NE) (Priority: Medium)

6.4 Advice

Promote “hare friendly” farming through seminars aimed at landowners. (Action: MBG; FWAG; NE) (Priority: Medium)

6.5 Communications and publicity

Use the Brown Hare as a flagship species for promoting good quality countryside. (Action: MBG; FWAG; NE; LAs) (Priority: Low)

7 Links to other action plans

7.1 UK BAP

Brown Hare SAP.

7.2 NM BAP

Grey Partridge SAP, Skylark SAP, Field Margins HAP.

8 Partners

BB: Merseyside BioBank

FC: Forestry Commission

FWAG: Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group

LAs: Local Authorities

LWT: Lancashire Wildlife Trust

MBG: Merseyside Biodiversity Group

MEAS: Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service

NE: Natural England

TMF: The Mersey Forest