

Species Statement for Sussex

brown hare

Lepus europaeus

1. Current Status

The brown hare is a common and conspicuous farmland species in Britain, probably introduced by the Romans in ancient times. It is widespread, but is absent from the north-west and western Highlands, where it is replaced by the mountain hare (*Lepus timidus*). The brown hare is present in Northern Ireland as a relatively recent introduction, where it competes with the indigenous mountain hare. Because of this, further action to support the population in Northern Ireland is discouraged, and this action plan is relevant only to the British mainland.

Formerly considered abundant, the brown hare appears to have undergone a substantial decline in numbers since the early 1960s, with population estimates now varying between 817,500 and 1,250,000. Information from shooting estates suggests that hare numbers have remained stable for the past ten years, although other evidence of this is unclear. Similar patterns of population change appear to have occurred throughout much of Europe.

2. Current Factors Affecting the Species

- Conversion of grassland to arable.
- Loss of habitat diversity in the agricultural landscape.
- Changes in planting and cropping regimes, such as a move from hay to silage, and autumn planting of cereals.

3. National Species Action Plan

National Species Action Plan objectives and targets are as follows:

- Maintain and expand existing populations, doubling spring numbers in Britain by 2010.

4. Current Action

Various aspects of hare ecology have been studied in Britain at The Game Conservancy Trust, Bristol University and Oxford University.

Populations are currently monitored through numbers of hares seen or shot during hunting, or numbers counted in spring.

JNCC commissioned a survey from Bristol University which provides a baseline against which conservation policies and action may be assessed.

Experimental work in Denmark suggests that simplified farming systems lead to reduced breeding performance. This appears to account for the link between hare numbers and farming pattern.

5. Objective for the Species

- Maintain and expand existing populations, doubling spring numbers in Sussex by 2010.

6. Links with Other Habitat and Species Action Plans

The conservation of this species is linked with the proposed action and implementation of the Arable Habitat Action Plan for Sussex.

7. Potential

8. Proposed Action

Monitoring only.

9. References

UK Biodiversity Group, (1999). National Species Action Plan for brown hare, *Lepus europaeus*.

11. Consultation