

Helping hares through the winter.

As winter approaches we will no doubt receive enquiries from people concerned about the ability of hares to survive in harsh weather conditions and whether there is anything they can do to help.

During the winter months hares retreat to woodland where they forage on bark and roots, so in the long term tree planting will be beneficial, especially on farms. In gardens hedges can be positioned to provide shelter from northerly and easterly winds. Hedges filter the air and are much more efficient shelter than solid structures such as panel fences or walls which create turbulence.

Another approach is supplementary feeding. In 2010 research was carried out to assess the effects of over-winter food availability on mountain hare body condition, fecundity and survival in two fed and two control areas. Hares fitted with passive induced transponder (PIT) tags and feeding stations equipped with PIT tag readers and data loggers were used to monitor individual use of supplementary feed. Food supplementation was associated with greater male body mass, earlier breeding and longer survival. At the population (treatment) level these differences were not statistically significant, but at the individual level the combined radio-telemetry and PIT tag data revealed a large and highly significant effect of supplementary feeding on survival. Commercial rabbit food was used in feeding stations, roofed to exclude rain.

Diseases in hares

Disease in hares might well have contributed to their decline during the past century. Probably the two most important diseases are Yersiniosis and Coccidiosis which can ravage populations in epidemics, killing many hares.

Coccidiosis results from a massive increase in Eimeria protozoans which normally inhabit the gut in small numbers. Some owners of tame rabbits will be familiar with a similar effect when a large increase in Pasteurella bacteria leads to a condition known as “snuffles”. In both cases it appears a breakdown in the immune system leads to a harmful increase in normally harmless organisms. Wet weather increases the incidence of Coccidiosis, especially when a wet autumn follows a dry summer. Leverets and young hares are most severely affected – taking awhile to die from lesions of their internal organs and becoming very thin. By contrast, Yersiniosis affects mainly adult hares, especially during the spring. They succumb very rapidly and show no outward bodily sign of disease.

With regard to Myxomatosis, some authorities say that hares definitely do not contract it, while others say they do, but only very rarely. The Myxoma virus causing the disease is carried by fleas inhabiting rabbit burrows and since hares live entirely above ground this difference in lifestyle might contribute to the fact that hares do not normally contract Myxomatosis. European Brown Hare Syndrome (EBHS) is, however, caused by a virus similar to that causing Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD) in rabbits. In both cases fatal lesions occur in the lungs, trachea and liver. Hares with (EBHS) can also suffer nervous disorders, running around in circles, falling on one side and blindness.

Re-introduction of mountain hares to Dartmoor

This from Natural England:

Thank you for your enquiry re. the introduction of Mountain Hares on Dartmoor. As you are probably aware much of Dartmoor is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and so any projects or plans proposed for the area will need a Habitats Regulation Assessment included in the study. Below is the link to the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) website with more detail on this designation:

<http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/protectedsites/sacselection/sac.asp?EUCode=UK0012929>

Any feasibility study should follow IUCN guidelines, and include disease screening. I understand that the species will be covered by the Game Act 1831 and so the implications of this will need looking into. Finally other possible regulatory control will come down to the possible consent/permission to take from a donor site if SSSI/SAC and the same would apply at a receptor/introduction site.

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