

Legal status of hares

Under the Hares Preservation Act 1892 it is illegal for a hare or leveret or part thereof to be sold or offered for sale from 1 March until 31 July inclusive. This means that hare cannot be on the menu in restaurants during the prohibited period. Killing hares outside the prohibited period, freezing them and then selling them within it does not circumvent the legislation. This applies to England and Wales whereas in Scotland the mountain hare has a shooting close season from 1 March until 31 July inclusive under the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011. In Scotland the brown hare has a shooting close season from 1 February to 30 September but remains without a close season in England and Wales. However, since the brown hare is classified as a game species it cannot be shot on Sundays or Christmas Day. It is illegal for hares to be hunted with dogs or coursed throughout the UK. The police should be notified in all cases of suspected illegal persecution of hares.

How long has the brown hare been present in Britain?

Evidence can be obtained by radio-carbon dating. Radio-active carbon is formed by the interaction of cosmic rays on the stable isotope C12 in the atmosphere. Radio active carbon C14 has a half life of 5568 years, so by measuring the amount remaining in a sample eg. a bone, the time at which accumulation of C14 ceased (ie the animal died) can be established. Figures obtained by this method are quoted as years Before Present (BP)

It is widely believed that the brown hare was introduced to Britain by the Romans around 2,000 years ago, but this is by no means certain. The Star-Carr Mesolithic archaeological site in Yorkshire has a radio-carbon date of 9488BP. The fauna was prey of Mesolithic hunters and was mainly large ungulates – roe and red deer moose, aurochs and boar, but the identity of a hare present is intriguing. This is represented only by the shaft of a tibia which Fraser & King thought too robust for a mountain hare and they very tentatively suggested a brown hare.

All fossil hares and rabbits were re-examined by Mayhew in 1975 including this one. He pointed out that mountain hares get larger as one goes north in Europe and at such an early post-glacial date (ie. the post-glacial maximum of the current Ice Age) one might expect mountain hares to be larger than they are now in Britain. Mayhew therefore suggested the Star-Carr specimen should be regarded as probably a mountain hare, but a tibia is insufficiently distinct to be assigned to either species.

A mountain hare(?) was also found at Dog Hole fissure, another Mesolithic site in the famous cave area of Cresswell Crags astride the Derbyshire – Nottinghamshire border. A small fissure appears to have filled very quickly for the cave deposits contain the bones of a single wolf, red deer and boar spread through the 1.45m of deposits. The additional mammals include red fox, wild cat, beaver, wood mouse, bank vole, tarpan, aurochs, common and pygmy shrew and four species of bat. A radio-carbon date on some of the larger bones was 9960. ie. early in the most recent post glacial period which probably accounts for the persistence of the tarpan and hare. A hare has also been found in another Mesolithic fauna at Cherhill in Wiltshire. The Mesolithic lasted 5,000 years in Britain and the land was essentially tree covered. Only the highest ground in the north of Britain would not have been covered with trees so animals of open country such as hares would have found little suitable habitat. Almost certainly the mountain hare has been here since before the last glacial maximum around 21,000 years ago, but the position of the brown hare continues to be a matter of interesting debate.

Menace of hare coursing in Lincolnshire

A dispersal order has been put in place, giving officers the power to direct people to leave the county if they are suspected of being involved in hare coursing. Hare coursers are often from outside of the county and there is a fear that they may be involved in other types of crime including the theft of rural equipment, irresponsible and dangerous driving, and driving vehicles unfit for the road. A police spokesman said: We recognise this is a growing problem in Lincolnshire and understandably it is causing unrest amongst our farming and rural communities. Farmers are growing increasingly frustrated at damage being caused to their fields and those that do stand up to hare coursers are subjected to extremely threatening and intimidating behaviour, and sometimes violence. Lincolnshire Police are using all available legislation to seize dogs, vehicles and arrest offenders where possible, and achieve positive outcomes for victims through prosecutions.

