



LIVING WITH... RABBITS & HARES

Hares and rabbits belong to the same family; although they have long front teeth like rats and mice, they are not rodents, but lagomorphs.

Three species are present in England and Wales; the European or common rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*), the European or brown hare (*Lepus europaeus*) and the mountain hare (*Lepus timidus*). Both the European rabbit and the brown hare were introduced to Britain by the Romans and by the 19th century had displaced mountain hares from much of their former range. In modern England, the mountain hare is found only on the Isle of Man and the Peak District of Derbyshire, where they were re-introduced.

Rabbits can be found throughout England and Wales in a range of habitats, including shrubby fields, arable land and pasture with hedgerows. Rabbits are also increasingly found in suburban areas; where they make their homes in garden, parks and cemeteries. Brown hares are also found throughout England and Wales, making their homes in arable farmland, sheltered grassy areas, hedgerows, pastures and woodland edges.

Although hares and rabbits are very different in some ways, there are many similarities; they are both prey animals that rely on speed and hiding to avoid or escape predators. They can both be seen standing on long hind legs, using their fantastic, panoramic eyesight and long, sensitive ears to warn them of danger. Both are active throughout the year and generally nocturnal, although they can be seen during the day (particularly rabbits in suburban areas).

Rabbits and hares are browsers that feed on grasses, leaves, heather, herbs, buds, twigs, field crops, and sometimes, tree bark and roots. In gardens, they are also known to eat lettuce, cabbage, root vegetables, and flowers. To cope with the wear and tear of this diet, their teeth grow continuously. Due to the low nutrient value of this diet, rabbits and hares have a unique



Adult European Rabbit

digestion system, called caecotrophy, which involves eating their own faeces to extract all the nutrients they need.

Hares are mostly solitary animals, except during mating, when up to ten males may surround a single female at any one time. The female will “box” males away until she is ready to mate, when she takes off at a run, followed by the remaining males. Only the fastest and fittest male will be left to mate with. This behaviour has led to the saying “mad as a March hare”.

By comparison, rabbits are very social animals, living in “towns” of up to 50 individuals in large, complex burrows called warrens (up to 3m deep and 45m long, some covering more than 2 acres). Adults will mostly interact with their smaller, close social group of a few adults and their offspring. Unlike hares, rabbits can breed at any time of the year.

Hares do not live underground, instead they shelter in “scrapes” or “forms” in the ground, about 10cm deep. These are shallow pits scraped in the grass, weeds, soil or in the winter snow.

Know the terms:

Rabbits: males are “bucks”, females are “does” and young are “kits” or “kittens”.

Hare: males are “bucks” or “jacks”, females “does” or “jills” (“dams” when they have young) and young are “leverets”.

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Juvenile European Rabbit ('Kitten')

What is hare coursing?

Hare coursing is the practice of chasing a hare with two dogs (usually greyhounds), which are slipped simultaneously from their leash. It is considered by some to be a 'competition' and a test of a dog's 'skills'. Being chased is extremely stressful for the hare and if caught it will die. Hare coursing is illegal throughout Britain.

Participating in, attending, or permitting hare coursing to take place on land is illegal under the Hunting Act 2004. There may also be other offences involved and anyone witnessing hare coursing taking place is advised not to approach the participants but to phone the police immediately on 101 - or 999 in an emergency.



Are rabbits or hares legally protected?

Although rabbits and hares do not benefit from any specific legal protection, they are covered by the Wild Mammals (Protection) Act 1996, which protects all wild mammals from cruelty. Additionally, the Animal Welfare Act 2006 protects any animal "under the control of man" including those caught in traps, from unnecessary suffering.

Under the Hare Preservation Act 1892, it is also an offence to sell any native adult hare or leveret from 1st March - 31st July.



Juvenile Brown Hare ('Leveret')

How can I tell a rabbit from a hare?

Rabbits are generally smaller than hares (often half the size when fully grown). As well as being larger than rabbits, hares have much longer ears (which are black-tipped) as well as longer, more powerful hind legs. The mountain hare's coat will also change to a pale grey or white during the winter (dependent on temperature).

It is very important to establish whether it's a young rabbit (kitten) or young hare (leveret), especially if you see one above ground on its own (see below):

- **Nostrils:** Whilst rabbits have beige fur and pink skin around the nostrils, hares have dark fur and black skin.
- **Ears and legs:** Hares have black substantially covering the tops of their ears and longer ears and legs than rabbits.
- Rabbits are born helpless, hairless and blind; they stay in the warren until able to look after themselves.
- Hares are born precocial, meaning they are mobile, fully furred and with eyes open. They are not born in a burrow but left by their mother in the open, in shallow hollow called a 'scrape'. She stays nearby in the day to guard them and will come to feed them during the night.

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What can I do to deter rabbits and hares?

FOR INDIVIDUAL PLANTS OR SMALL AREAS

- Solid mesh netting 90cm high can be installed without the need to bury part of it underground.
- Wire netting or biodegradable spiral tree guards can be put around the base of young trees or shrubs to prevent damage to the bark.

AROUND GARDENS OR FLOWER BEDS

- Install and maintain a physical barrier like a fence or wall using: 18 gauge wire mesh, 120-140cm high, with 30cm below ground level; the mesh that is below ground should be angled outwards after 15cm to deter burrowing underneath. Maximum mesh size should be 2.5cm to prevent young rabbits from squeezing through. The mesh should be attached to two 2.65 cm high tensile steel straining wires – at the top and bottom of the fence – with galvanised fence rings.
- Gates in and out of the fenced area also need to be rabbit-proof and must be kept closed when not in use.
- Electric netting and electric strained wire fences are sometimes used to keep out rabbits and can be purchased from agricultural merchants. **Do not use electrified fencing or netting if pets are present.**

You should consider the needs of other wild animals when considering installing fencing; for example, if the fencing crosses any badger or hedgehog runs, you will need to install appropriate badger and hedgehog gates.

For further advice and guidance, the Forestry Commission has produced a Technical Guide for Forest Fencing, which can be obtained by calling their Publication Department at 0161 495 4845, or by downloading from their website

(<https://www.forestryresearch.gov.uk/documents/661/fctg002.pdf>).



PLANTING

If physically preventing rabbits from entering your property is impractical, then you may want to consider selective planting; a list of plants that rabbits don't seem to like is produced by the Royal Horticultural Society on their website (<https://goo.gl/7GpYbJ>).

REPELLENTS

Most well-stocked garden centres will also have approved chemical deterrent products available for use in the garden. Please always read and follow the manufacturer's application instructions and cautionary advice if you do decide to use one of these products.

Can rabbit numbers be legally controlled?

Wherever possible, the RSPCA would always prefer non-lethal solutions and only if there is a serious problem and non-lethal means are ineffective or impractical, should killing be contemplated.

Under the Pests Act 1954, all of England, except for London and the Isles of Scilly, is declared a "rabbit clearance area". This means that landowners have a legal obligation to control rabbits on their land, or if this is not possible, to put up rabbit proof fencing to stop them causing damage to any adjoining crops.

Rabbits can be legally controlled using gas, traps (spring, cage or box) and snares, shooting or ferreting. We would always recommend you engage the services of experienced, professional pest controllers, particularly when considering the use of gassing products, to ensure these actions are performed in line with legislation. When using traps or snares, it is important to remember that it is an offence to cause unnecessary suffering to any animal in the trap, to use any unapproved spring trap, to fail to check snares or traps at least once a day, to use a self-locking snare or to place them near a fox earth or badger sett, or where they will be exposed to severe weather. You are also legally obliged to humanely dispatch any rabbit caught in alive in a trap or snare. More information on the legal control of rabbits can be found at www.gov.uk/guidance/rabbits-how-to-control-numbers.

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Adult rabbit showing late-stage symptoms of myxomatosis

What is myxomatosis, and how can I tell if a rabbit or hare is suffering from it?

Myxomatosis is a highly infectious and fatal disease for wild or domestic rabbits and occasionally hares. A form of pox virus, myxomatosis is spread by fleas, mites and biting flies such as mosquitoes, as well as by direct contact between infected animals. The disease is widespread in wild rabbits in the UK and can persist in the environment (e.g. rabbit housing and enclosures).

Myxomatosis symptoms

Symptoms will vary, but may include any of the following:

- Lumpy, 'nodular' lesions on the head and/or body
- Swelling around the lips, nose, eyes, ears (often causing them to droop) and around the genitals and anus
- Runny eyes, developing into severe conjunctivitis often causing blindness
- Excessive amounts of thick pus discharge from the nose and eyes

It is illegal to use or permit the use of a rabbit or hare with myxomatosis to deliberately spread the disease among uninfected animals.

If you see a rabbit that you think may have myxomatosis or RHD, please call our cruelty and advice line on 0300 1234 999.

I have found a young rabbit or hare alone, what should I do?

If they are found above ground with eyes closed and little to no fur, this will be a rabbit that has been dug out of their warren and they will need help; please call our cruelty and advice line on the number below.

If the animal's eyes are open and it is fully furred, it may be a young rabbit or hare (see earlier in the factsheet for some identification tips). In this instance, the best thing to do is to leave it alone. Watch the animals from a safe distance of 60-100 meters.

If it is a young rabbit, it should soon move away and return to their warren.

If the animal does not move and remains very still and quiet, even if you are very close, this is likely a young hare. Do not touch it. Its mother is probably nearby and will come back some time in the night. If in the morning the leveret is in exactly the same spot and has not moved even a few feet, please call our cruelty and advice line on the number below.

What is RHD?

RHD stands for Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease, sometime called VHD (Viral Haemorrhagic Disease) and refers to a highly infectious and fatal disease that affects European and domestic rabbits. A recent strain, RHVD2, also affects hares.

RHD is swift and sudden, often showing little or no symptoms. Some rabbits are found dead with blood around the eyes and mouth, but there is very little way of recognising the disease until it is too late.

To report an injured or sick rabbit or hare to the RSPCA, please ring our cruelty and advice line on

0300 1234 999