

## Current Status - UK and Local

UK Biodiversity Status: Species of Conservation Concern.

LBAP Partnership Area Status:

Local Priority Species

Mountain Hares are indigenous to Britain and are found in moorland areas. Their usual habitat is short, new heather for feeding and longer, more mature heather for shelter and protection from predators.

Mountain Hares are native to Ireland and the Highlands of Scotland, but were introduced to many Scottish islands in the 19th century. Areas of the Scottish lowlands were colonised from introductions to Ayrshire in the mid-19th century and they were released into the Peak District and South Yorkshire Pennines around 1880. A small introduction to North Wales, around Bangor, was made in 1885 and also on some Scottish Islands including Orkney, Shetland, Mull and Skye.

There has been no systematic recording of Mountain Hares in Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park, but it is suspected that numbers have declined recently. Game bag records are available since 1901 when 300 were noted as killed in one season on the Mistylaw Hills (The Southern Upland Partnership 2005). Small populations have been observed by Ranger staff and the general public around the Hill of Stake and Misty Law. The recorded distribution is mainly in the moorland ground at Clyde Muirshiel (Fig 1).

Many isolated Mountain Hare populations in Britain have died out, so it is important that the conservation of this species is highlighted. The current estimate of the UK Mountain Hare population is approximately 350,000, of which only some 500 are found outside Scotland in the Pennines and Peak District. This UK population is presently considered to be in decline. Mountain Hares are listed in Annex V of the EC 1992 Habitats Directive that prohibits certain methods of taking or killing wild animals.

## Ecology and Management

High densities of Mountain Hares are usually found on moors managed for grouse where burning has produced a mosaic of different aged stands of heather ideal for both hares and grouse. In Scotland, heather is the main plant species eaten with the remainder of the diet including mainly grasses (wavy hair grass, tufted hair grass, mat grass), and a small amount of blueberry and sedge species. Young pioneer heather that grows after rotational burning is preferred. During deep snow hares will also eat gorse, soft rush and bark and twigs from willow, rowan, juniper or birch. It has been noted however, that where there is a mix of heather moorland, upland pastures and broadleaf woodlands, Mountain Hares preferred either upland pastures or woodland habitats and moorland was usually avoided. Although the use of woodlands is related to the plant cover as well as weather and time-of-year, it is thought that moorland in itself does not determine the presence of Mountain Hares.

The females give birth to a litter of 1-5 leverets between February and September. The young are born with their eyes open and feed on milk for the first 3 weeks of life.

There is no clear cyclic pattern for the Mountain Hare population in Scotland and there is no firm evidence that they show regular fluctuations as noted in Scandinavia every 3-4 years or every 10 years in North America. There is evidence however, that some hare populations in Scotland are regulated by parasites and that this may contribute to population instability (Newey 2005).

The Mountain Hare's main predator is the fox but wildcats and eagles are also important. Hen harriers, buzzards and stoats take leverets.

## Factors causing loss or decline

It is suspected that there are two main reasons for the reduction in numbers of Mountain Hares. The overgrazing of heather moorland has allowed rough grassland to become predominant and the activities of sport shooting and control of mountain hare by gamekeepers. Recent agricultural policies have encouraged farmers to increase sheep numbers to levels where overgrazing of heather moorland can become a problem. The resultant change of vegetation on heather moorland from overgrazing is detrimental to Mountain Hares by reducing heather vital for both feeding and shelter. In addition, Mountain Hares are also at risk from changes in land use. As grouse moors have become a less profitable land use, many moorland areas have been afforested or heather management has become limited. Young forestry plantations can initially support



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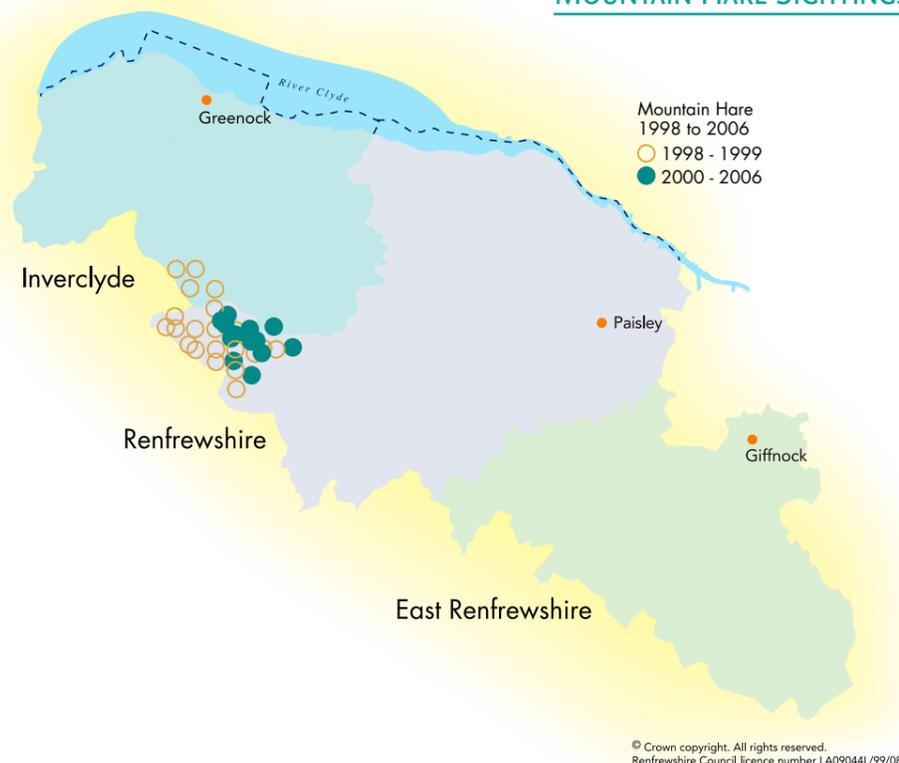
# MOUNTAIN HARE

*Lepus timidus scoticus*

The Mountain Hare is smaller than the Brown Hare, with a more rounded shape, and without a black upper surface on the tail. They also have shorter ears and legs than the Brown Hare with a head and body length of 50-60cm weighing 2.5-4kg.

They are also known as blue hare due to their summer colour form when they have a grey/black coat. In winter they are partly, or completely white.

## MOUNTAIN HARE SIGHTINGS



large numbers of hares. However, as the trees mature, the canopy closes and lack of vegetation cover reduces hare numbers.

Although the Mountain Hare is not a managed game species, large numbers are shot. Predation may also have an effect on mountain hare numbers. The effect of over-shooting or even low levels of shooting in small populations is likely to contribute to the localised extinction of many populations, because many populations are small and highly fragmented, they are highly vulnerable to over-exploitation. There is evidence of hybridisation between brown and mountain hares, which may threaten the mountain hare's genetic diversity, however, further research is required to establish the extent of this threat.

Despite the potential threat to the British Mountain Hare population there is no national conservation strategy.

## Objectives and Targets

Objective 1	Identify current population distribution of Mountain Hare
Objective 2	Identify key habitats and assess condition
Objective 3	Identify potential for appropriate habitat management
Objective 4	Promote public awareness of local Mountain Hares.

## We will achieve these objectives by:

Action	Actioned by	Timescale
Establish a monitoring programme to determine habitat use, population and distribution of the Mountain Hare in Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park	CMRP	2009 - 2012
Provide species distribution information to the LBAP Partnership	CMRP	2009 - 2012
Encourage landowners to incorporate Mountain Hare conservation into their land management practices	CMRP Heather Trust	2009 - 2012
Ensure any development proposals do not negatively impact on existing populations potential sites.	LA's	2009 - Ongoing
Encourage landowners to observe a voluntary code of practice not to shoot Mountain Hares for a ten year period while their numbers are monitored.	CMRP Heather Trust	2009 - 2012
Encourage members of the public to be involved in the recording of the Mountain Hare.	CMRP UWS Biodiversity Officer	2009 - 2012
Run promotional events to promote interest in Mountain Hares.	Biodiversity Officer Paisley Museum CMRP	2009 - 2012

## Links with Other Action Plans

Brown Hare, Hen Harrier, Unimproved Grasslands, Dwarf Shrub Heath

