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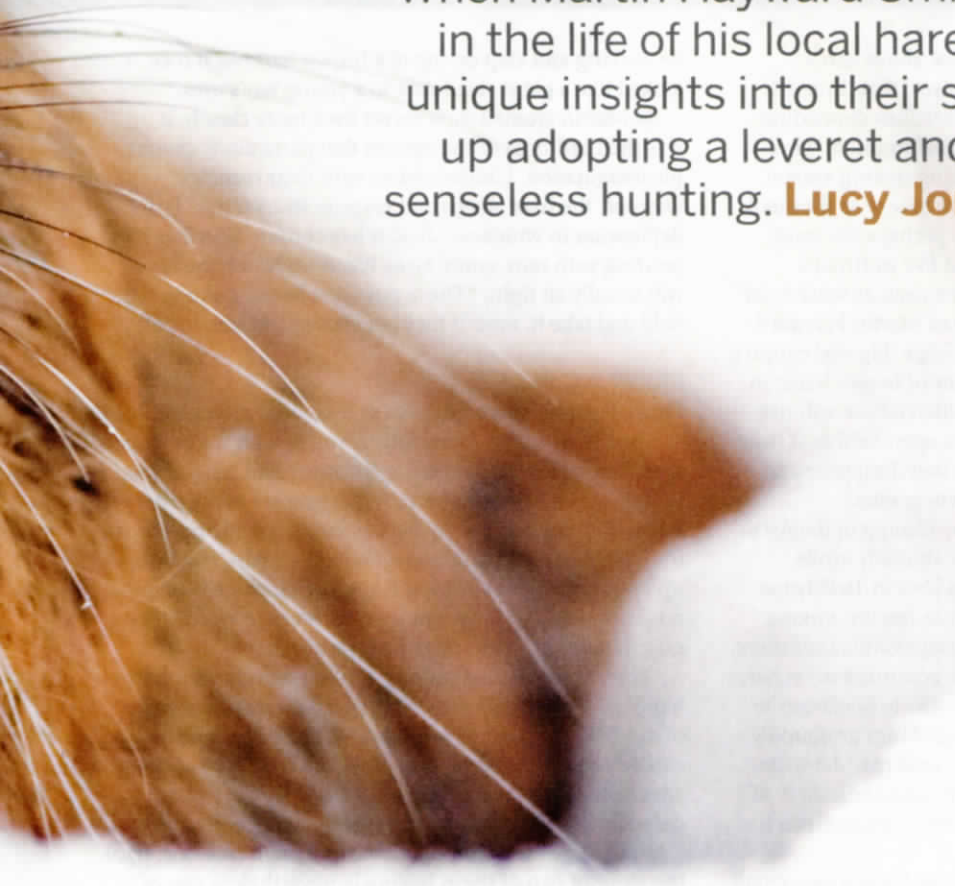
# A year with Hares

When Martin Hayward Smith documented a year in the life of his local hares, not only did he gain unique insights into their secret lives – he ended up adopting a leveret and campaigning against senseless hunting. **Lucy Jones** went to meet him.



A hare shelters from the elements in a shallow depression, or 'form', dug out of the snow. Unlike rabbits, the species does not use burrows.

Above: Martin photographed this hare in February while filming a documentary. Below: note the distinctively long, black-tipped ears.

There is something mystical about hares. From the colour of their eyes, that unusual agate that glints amber or yellow depending on the light, to the theatrical moment when female and male box during mating season, white fluff carrying on the breeze as they look quite possessed, they are perhaps the most otherworldly of all the mammals that live in Britain.

"You can understand why they were seen as witches in the old days," says wildlife cameraman Martin Hayward Smith, from his home in North Norfolk's 'big sky' country, which has one of the highest densities of brown hares in the UK. "All of a sudden a hare will rise from your feet in an open field as if from nowhere. And then just disappear and appear again somewhere else."

When he's not away filming in the Arctic Circle, Peru or another similarly exotic wildlife paradise, Martin lives in Ticketyboo Cottage, a home-made nature reserve, among barn owls, stoats, grey partridges and kingfishers. In 2013 he took a TV show commission on hares and decided to dedicate a year to his favourite species. The project changed him profoundly. "An inner calmness overcame me," he writes in *A Year With Hares*, a photographic diary of the experience. But his love of lagomorphs had developed years before.

"The first time I saw hares I was a very small lad," he remembers. "I used to go on pheasant shoots across vast, great stubble fields. You'd be walking and step on top of a brown hare. As it rose, it looked like a giant-sized deer to a young boy's eyes."

As Martin studied their secret lives more closely, it was the hardiness of the species that particularly caught his imagination. Unlike rabbits with their complex warrens, the hare sleeps and rests on its own in a 'form', a depression in whichever field it has chosen. Whether it's pouring with rain, snowing or blisteringly hot, the hare will usually sit tight. "These guys just lie out there in the field and take it, even if they get blasted," Martin says.

## FURRY MO FARAHS

From day one, hares are already less vulnerable than baby rabbits. Leverets are born fully formed, with fur and open eyes. They grow much bigger, stronger and rangier than rabbits, and a diverse diet (not just grasses and herbs) helps them to survive. As well as being mainly nocturnal, they are the fastest land mammals in Britain, reaching up to 70kph when running from predators such as foxes, dogs and birds of prey. The environment in which they originated holds the key to their survival.

"Their whole behaviour and ecology reflects their native habitat – grassy plains in Asia," says Lizzie Wilberforce of the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales, who has carried out extensive surveys of the species. "These are creatures of open steppe, and that's why their best defences are high speed and avoiding being seen."

While hares may not be native to Britain (see box, p70), the sight of two of them boxing is nevertheless one of the country's most iconic wildlife spectacles. It's often assumed that the fight is between two bucks, but usually

it will be a doe warding off a would-be suitor. "In order to mate, male hares jostle and tumble over each other to get to a female," Martin says. At times, more than one male will get involved, and it looks chaotic, hence the familiar expression 'mad as a March hare'.

The 'March' bit of the expression is actually a myth – you can observe this behaviour throughout much of the year (see the timeline on p68). "The saying arose because crops traditionally tend to be lower in early spring, making the hares more visible," says Martin.

It can get quite nasty, too. As well as sharp claws, both male and female hares have spurs on their front legs. "So when you see fur carried on the wind, that's the reason why," Martin explains. "Those spurs can cause a lot of damage. Most people aren't really aware of that."

And that's not even the most potentially violent element of the mating process. "Sometimes when a couple is fighting the male will jump over the top of the female, and if he's in the wrong position she will actually bite his testicles," says Martin.

But the most mysterious part of this pantomime is the seldom-seen 'circle' of hares, where a group of young bucks who've picked up a female's scent spiral around her. "There is a madness in seeing 9 or even 11 hares all running around in a circle and boxing off each other, sometimes with two does," says Martin, animatedly. You sometimes see a scattering of hares zigzagging all over the place if the doe escapes or a fight erupts.

During the year Martin followed the hares there were plenty of surprises, not least of which was adopting one. He couldn't help but take in a leveret after a dog attack left her with a broken leg. He named her Harlene, meaning 'from the hare meadow'.

There is a long history of British naturalists adopting wild animals at some point in their lives. Chris Packham, for example, looked after a kestrel as a child, Gerald Durrell cared for everything from spiders to owls during his time in Corfu, Peter Scott had a varied avian menagerie, Mike Tomkies reared a Scottish wildcat and Gavin Maxwell famously adopted otters.

## HARE TODAY, RELEASED TOMORROW

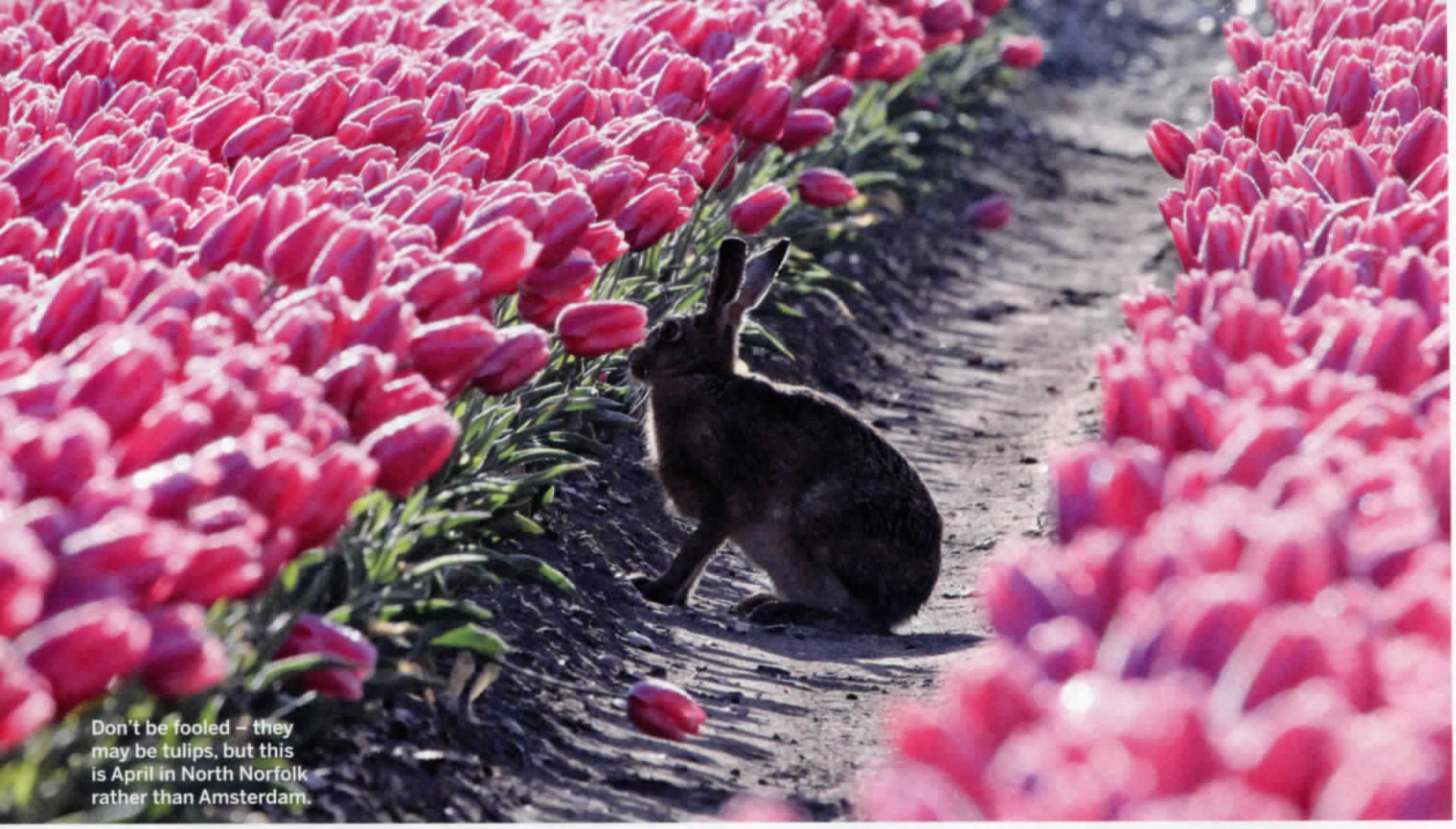
"I didn't want to box Harlene up, so she had free rein of the house," Martin remembers. "She'd find a nice place on the carpet where the sun was coming through. But after the droppings and urine stains got a bit much, I built an outdoor enclosure so she could get used to smells and birds flying above her, and develop her senses. Looking after Harlene was a fantastic privilege. After two months, though, her leg had healed and I released her into a sugar-beet field nearby."

Aside from the danger posed by rogue domestic dogs, two other significant threats to hares gathered pace during the late 19th century. First, an act was passed giving landowners the right to shoot them. Second, farming began to intensify, a process that accelerated ▶

**WHILE HARES MAY NOT BE NATIVE, THE SIGHT OF TWO OF THEM BOXING IS ONE OF BRITAIN'S MOST ICONIC WILDLIFE SPECTACLES.**

**Top, left and right: Martin adopted Harlene when she was two-and-a-half weeks old. Her two siblings were killed in the dog attack that broke her leg. Above: a hare at harvest time. Sadly the animals often fall victim to combine harvesters.**

From bottom left: Andrew Parkinson; Martin Hayward-Smith (x4)



Don't be fooled – they may be tulips, but this is April in North Norfolk rather than Amsterdam.

**IT REMAINS LEGAL FOR FARMERS TO SHOOT HARES IF THEY BELIEVE THAT THEY COULD BECOME A PEST.**

dramatically after World War II. Indeed the number of hares in Britain has dropped by 80 per cent over the past century, according to the Hare Preservation Trust.

Martin has witnessed the consequence of ever-larger farm machinery in person: accidents with hares, especially leverets. "I've seen farmers ploughing fields and not noticing what's going on," he recalls. "A small leveret will just stay firm and anchor in. Its instinct is not to move."

And the way in which crops are grown also has an impact, says Lizzie Wilberforce: "Hares need food year-round, yet new farming practices mean there can be shortages at key times." Huge blocks of fields growing a single crop – often covered in plastic – limit what is available, whereas in the past the countryside was a patchwork quilt of different crops.

The threat posed by people is very real, too. During his year with hares Martin witnessed illegal coursing first-hand: "It's horrible to see a hare get caught and ripped to shreds by dogs. And needless as well – the dogs could easily have had muzzles." Though hare coursing and hunting with dogs was banned in 2004 (see box, p69), it still goes on. "There will always be a hardcore group out there who want to disrupt things, whether it's stealing birds' eggs or pitting greyhounds against hares."

It also remains legal for farmers to shoot hares if they're being a pest – or if they believe that they could become one. But it's debatable whether hares ever cause enough of a problem to warrant a cull. Norfolk ▶

## THE BROWN HARE'S YEAR

### FEBRUARY TO MARCH

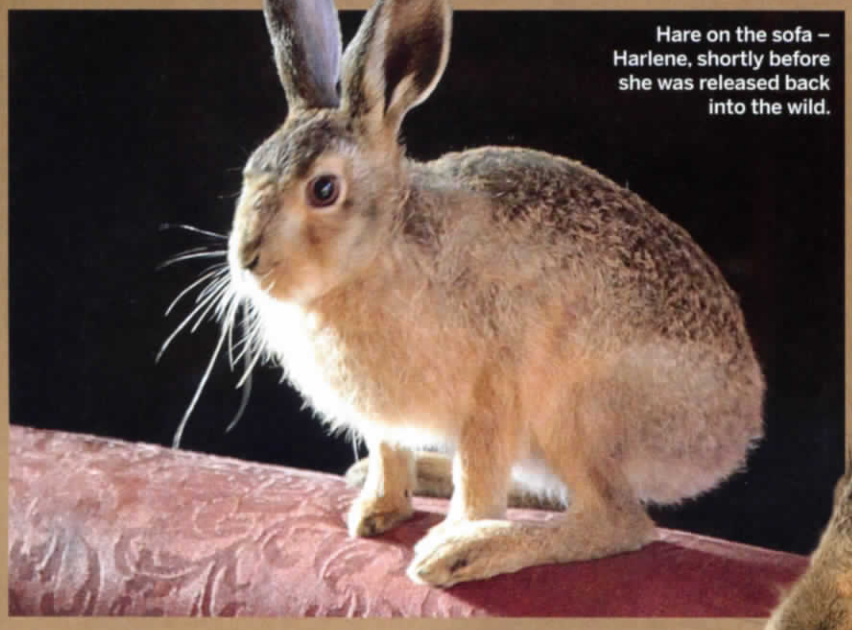
Hares traditionally start breeding in February, with mating activity peaking in March, though due to milder winters breeding can occur virtually year-round. The hare-shooting season also begins now, taking over from pheasant shooting (which stops on 1 February).

### APRIL TO MAY

Births peak from April to the summer months. Does produce in the region of three litters a year containing one to four leverets after a gestation of approximately 42 days. Wet weather in spring is a danger for hares because they can get liver disease.

### MAY TO JULY

The year's first young are typically weaned in May, and does usually then have their second litters. The diet of hares is most diverse now, including a variety of grasses, herbs and crops such as wheat, sugar beet, maize, beans and peas.



Hare on the sofa – Harlene, shortly before she was released back into the wild.

Photos by Martin Hayward Smith: main and bottom centre; Simon Litten

## HARE HUNTING AND COURSING

The Hunting Act 2004 bans hunting wild mammals (including deer, foxes, hares, otters and mink) with dogs for sport in England and Wales, both on foot and on horseback. It also bans hare coursing. But both hunting and coursing continue despite the law, says John Rimington of the Hare Preservation Trust. If caught a criminal faces a fine of up to £5,000; currently there are no custodial sentencing powers, though there are calls for the introduction of six-month prison sentences, in line with the Wild Mammals (Protection) Act 1996 and Protection of Badgers Act 1992.

The League Against Cruel Sports says that there have been 341 convictions under the Hunting Act to date (until the end of 2013 – figures are not yet available for 2014). The enforcement of the Hares Preservation Act 1892 is the only legislation that provides hares with a measure of protection during their breeding season. It is illegal to sell any hare or leveret between 1 March and 31 July, though imported hares are exempt.

### AUGUST TO OCTOBER

Does produce their third litters; a fourth is also possible, though this is more common in mainland Europe than in Britain. Young that were born early in the year occasionally breed themselves towards the end of the summer.

### NOVEMBER TO JANUARY

Hares are often less obvious now – to escape cold winds they lie low or slink off to shelter in spinneys and copses. In winter grasses represent up to 90 per cent of their diet, but they dig for root crops when frost or snow have fallen, and even eat bark and twigs.

Kiss chase: a buck pursues a doe in the hope of mating.

landowner Chris Skinner argues that there is no good reason for farmers to shoot hares at all. "We don't need to eat them, and they're not going to damage crops," he says. "One sheep eats the same as seven hares, so the argument that they're vermin doesn't hold."

During the 1940s, when Skinner was born, hares were a problem because of wartime food shortages. But now that Britain produces lots of arable crops, he believes they should be protected instead. "It's absolutely a crime that some farmers are carrying on with hare shoots," he says. "There are plenty of them still taking place."

### SHOTGUN MASSACRE

Reports of enormous shoots that end with the deaths of hundreds of hares a day are not uncommon in counties such as Norfolk and Wiltshire. Toni Shephard of the League Against Cruel Sports points out that this is a sport, and has nothing to do with land management.

John Rimington of the Hare Preservation Trust agrees. "The idea that you can target stationary hares at an organised shoot is a farce," he says. "People may claim it's to control hare numbers, but having been driven into a line of guns, the hares are not going to sit still – they sprint away. It's why this is good sport. Sadly with amateur shots many animals are simply wounded."

**REPORTS OF ENORMOUS SHOOTS THAT END WITH THE DEATHS OF HUNDREDS OF HARES A DAY ARE NOT UNCOMMON IN SOME COUNTIES.**

Thankfully hare conservation is proving successful on a growing number of farms and estates. "Stewardship schemes encourage landowners to plant more wildflower margins," says Martin. "This does hares a lot of good, particularly leverets which can hide there from predators."

Martin has convinced many local landowners to stop shooting hares. But he – and the Hare Preservation Trust – would like to take things further. They want to see a 'closed season' in England, as there is in the rest of Europe (with a shorter one in Scotland). It would mean that hares can only be culled in, ideally, November, when they're unlikely to be giving birth or mating. "They're culling hares in January and February now, and because our winters are often milder these hares have already got young and they're giving birth," says Martin. "So they're shooting pregnant females and leaving leverets to die."

We still know relatively little about hares compared with rabbits. But we do know that to lose them would be tragic. Martin remains thoughtfully optimistic, however. "Hares have been running across our open fields since Roman times, and I hope that it's a spectacle our children's children will still be able to enjoy."

*LUCY JONES is a journalist who curates the Wildlife Daily website (find out more at http://wildlifedaily.tumblr.com).*

## HARES IN BRITAIN

The brown hare was introduced to Britain by the Romans 2,000 years ago, presumably as a source of food. The animal was a symbol of fertility, and no wonder – a female hare can become pregnant twice at the same time, and hares can mate up to 20 times a day. Characterised in folklore and mythology as a trickster, a deity or associated with witchcraft, the species was also a symbol of Easter before the Easter Rabbit. The March Hare in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures In Wonderland* (1865) is one of the most celebrated fictional hares, and helped embed the expression 'mad as a March hare' in British culture – though the phrase first appeared as long ago as 1529. In 2011 a report by Toni Bunnell of York University named the brown hare as one of the British species most at risk of extinction by 2050.

### FIND OUT MORE

BBC Radio 4 You can listen to an episode of the series *The Living World* discussing Britain's brown hares at **www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00yw63h**

- See more photos from *My Year with Hares* (£27.95, Red Hare Publishing) at **www.discoverwildlife.com**, and buy the book at **www.martinhaywardsmith.com**

Andrew Parkinson

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