



My year with hares

Wildlife cameraman and photographer Martin Hayward Smith kept a diary of a revelatory 12 months in the company of Norfolk's beguiling brown hares

THE first time I saw a hare was when I was a young lad out beating and, as I walked across a stubble field, this large mammal suddenly got up from under my feet. We were both startled as it sprinted in the opposite direction, but I've never forgotten that day.

I've always wanted to take time out for a year to observe my favourite species. It would come down to fieldcraft, knowledge of the land and luck, but I am fortunate to have access to many thousands of acres covering several private locations in north Norfolk, with its prime hare habitats, from Holkham and The Barshams to Burnham Market. I armed myself with a small rucksack containing my faithful camera and set out, using this diary to record my adventures.

It was a wild and erratic start to the year, but, as the seasons changed, so did I: an inner calmness and contentment came over me as I followed the path of the hare and life out on the open fields, under a huge and ever-changing Norfolk sky.

↑ March 3

Sometimes, while out looking for leverets in the stubble field, I use my Thermos flask to mark the tramlines where I've spotted one in the distance and then carry on looking for others. These lines are then marked with sticks, as I place my hide in a nearby hedge, to wait and observe. From here, I've seen many tractor drivers stop to place leverets onto the turned-over soil as they plough up the land.



↑ March 12

Oystercatchers are piping away on an oilseed-rape field and I watch an amazing battle between a male and a female hare, which lasts for ages. Eventually, they mate and then lie down some two yards apart, as other young bucks run up and down the field with their noses to the ground. The pair lay flat, but one young buck picks up her scent and heads in, only to be chased off by the dominant male. Close by is another female with two males in pursuit; now, five of them are running across field after field. Two more males are criss-crossing the field with noses to the ground.

I am sitting in my car on top of a hill, looking down into a bowl, which is just like an arena. Another pair run in and mate—that's three couples in an hour. The sun is shining, but there's a cold, gusting wind cutting across the hilltops and I have 12 hares around me. Now, with two fights going on, it's time to start my vehicle and get closer. What a fight—there's fur everywhere.

March 17

I had to smile to myself today while stalking a hare. The feel wasn't quite right, so I put my binoculars up to my eyes. It was a large flint!

March 22

Suddenly, there it is, running along the field—my first blue hare [not to be confused with the mountain hare—here, blue refers to an unusual silver colour variation in the brown hare]. I am smitten.



→ April 1

I need to find some leverets, but where to start? I phone eight gamekeepers in search of some. Then, late one afternoon, I find a nest of four, just a few days old. A female can give birth to three to four litters per year, of two to four—and occasionally five—young. They are born fully furred with their eyes open and are weaned by about four weeks old.



May 23

I catch up with one of the old boys today. He asks what I'm doing and I tell him I'm filming brown hares. 'Oh,' he says, 'you mean the stubble stag', before reeling off all the other local names by which the hare is known: the long lugs, the stook deer, frisky legs, the wild one, the skipper, the hug-the-ground and the lurke.



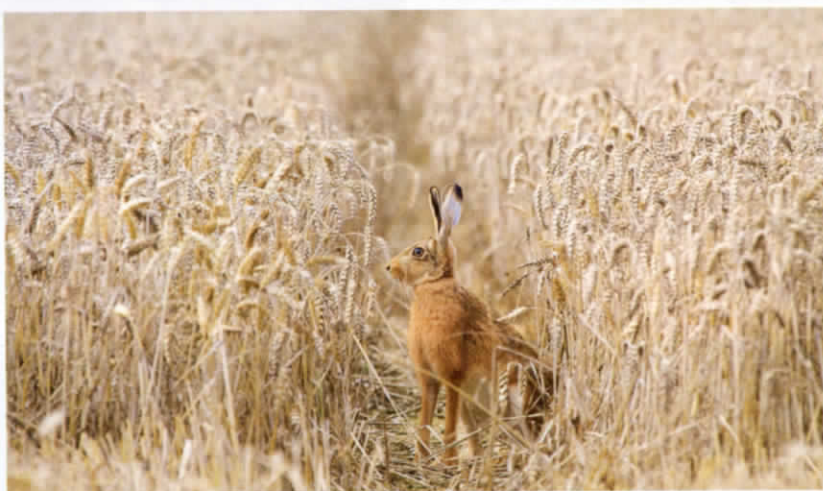
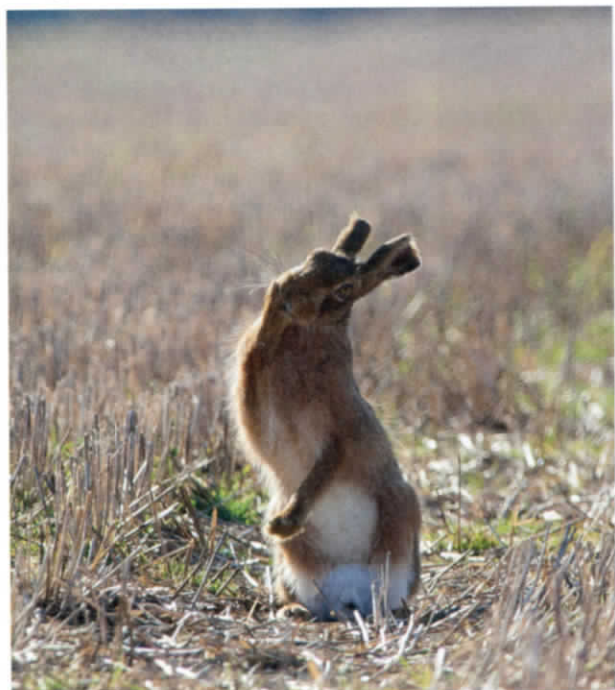
← May 25

After an early start just before dawn, I drive up to the hide. Once again, I'm playing the waiting game. Later that afternoon, I'm alerted by bird alarm calls and, there to my left, coming down the edge as bold as brass, is a fox carrying a grey partridge. I compose my shot, but only take about six frames for I have the image I want. It's not until afterwards that I wonder if the partridge was sitting on a clutch of eggs.



↑ July 29

A warm summer's evening with a heady fragrance in the air, as I sit out in one of Norfolk Lavender's [near Heacham] fields in full bloom. The sun is setting and thousands of insects are dancing over the backlit purple haze of flower heads. I have been here over many years, so it comes as no surprise to see families of grey partridge exploiting the richly abundant insect life. But also living in harmony among the scented rows of plants are hares that have taken sanctuary alongside the buzzing, pollinating bees.



↑ August 30

For once, I'm at home for the harvest. I phone the farm manager and head keeper and, with their blessing, head out down the farm tracks. As I drive, it takes me a while to get into the mindset of the hare, which has lived peacefully in these fields for the past eight months. Now, the combine harvester is cutting down their rainforest. Suddenly, a hare appears down the line, running towards me. I move to my next position and four hares break cover. Some sit to take in what's happening, some run for the hedge, while others wait until the very last minute. More often than not, the hares run back, only to have to run across the blades once more.

← September 12

I've come to know and love some hares, especially No Lugs, whose ear tips were sliced off by a combine many moons ago. From an early age, leverets are able to play dead, freezing in one spot instead of fleeing when faced with danger. He now comes up to me quite closely and settles down to wash and clean. He's a great character and I hope he makes it through to next season.

Hare today, gone tomorrow

○ The brown hare is Britain's fastest land mammal, clocking speeds of up to 40mph

○ **There are about 700,000 hares in the UK—they are especially prolific in East Anglia, but sparser in the West Country and much of Wales; in northern Scotland, the brown hare is replaced by the mountain hare, *Lepus timidus***

○ The true origin of *Lepus europaeus* is something of a mystery—there is evidence of its presence from the Iron Age onwards, but not much before that

○ **The expression to 'kiss the hare's foot', meaning 'to be late', alludes to the hare's great speed and the notion that, if you hesitate, it will have gone and all that will be left is a footprint**

○ Hares are solitary, not colonial, and don't burrow. They create shallow resting places, in fields or long grass, known as 'forms'

○ **A hare's paw, when carried in the right-hand pocket, was believed to ward off cramp and rheumatism**

○ It was also once believed that, if a pregnant woman saw a hare, her child would have a 'hare lip'

○ **The phrase 'mad as a March hare' is derived from the antics of hares during their breeding season**

○ An image of three running hares with linked ears can be found in many medieval churches and cathedrals across Britain—possibly due to their association with the Virgin Mary and the belief that hares were hermaphrodites or as a representation of the Holy Trinity

November 14

It's time to build a new enclosure—bigger, higher and with an overhang. Harlene has made a form under the metal tree seat, which she spends a lot of time in, surrounded by tall grass. Whenever a magpie flies over calling, she sinks down and lies flat, with her ears horizontal on her back.



→ October 20

My, what a difference 10 days make! Harlene's back leg seems to be healing well, the black tips on her ears are more prominent and her features sharper. I pick some fresh, tender short grass for her and [my daughter] Megan and I are amazed at the loud grinding noise she makes while eating. After a bottle feed or chewing on grass, she retires to the back of the sofa and rests up, safe in her space.



← October 6

My friend, David, has passed a 2½-week-old leveret to me to look after at the weekends. She is the only survivor of three youngsters that were attacked by a dog in their nest—the other two were killed instantly. David took her to the vet where an X-ray showed that her back leg is broken below the knee. She wouldn't accept a splint, so nature will have to take its course. I've called her Harlene, meaning 'from the hare meadow'.



↑ November 19

Get home late after a busy shoot and am greeted by the hare sitting on the arm of the settee. Then, suddenly, there's a thundering down the hallway and Harlene turns the corner at speed, leaps onto the bags and the cases and is there in front of me on my worktop. ➤

→ November 30

Today is release day for Harlene. It's a hell of a wrench, but it's got to be done. I get the last of the kale, broccoli and cut sprouts from the fridge and take them out to the pen for her last high-protein feed. Harlene hops into her travelling box and then Megan and I head to Buckenham. We walk out into the sugar beet field, which will be good cover from raptors and the weather. As soon as Harlene comes out of her box, her senses kick in and she sniffs the leaves and the soil, and then takes a look around to observe the skyline. And with that, she sinks down into the vegetation and is gone.



↑ January 9

The big freeze. It's now quite easy to see where the hares have been, their footprints navigating paths across the vast white landscape. Soon, I find some in their frozen forms. I do admire these creatures for their ability to take all that the weather throws at them—their only shelter a scrape in the open fields, braving Arctic conditions that, at night, fall below -9° Centigrade.

→ February 3

Spot the hare.



↑ February 28

Spring has sprung.

→ March 27

My mobile rings—it's Richard, who's just been told by his underkeeper that he's seen the blue hare on Ed's Hill. I drive to the field, but there's no sign. Then, I see it, lying flat. I am conscious that I'm filming my first blue hare in East Anglia. I'm elated to have found the Barsham blue hare again. To be able to sit and look deep into those wide, golden eyes, if only for a short time, has been amazing.  This is an abridged extract from 'My Year With Hares', £27.95, published by Martin Hayward Smith (01328 820660; www.martinhaywardsmith.com)





Boxing March hares, photographed by Paul Sawyer/FLPA

Irish whiskey

'We are serious about how we make our whiskey, but we're not serious about



how we drink it'

The spirit that's reconquering the world, page 76

In The Garden

'Poppies are such delicate flowers, with their thin, translucent petals'

These cheerful flowers are easy to grow, page 48

Interview

'Every race is top class with horses primed to the very minute. It's gripping'

Robert Waley-Cohen, page 34



Hare today, gone tomorrow: Harlene, the injured leveret, made herself at home in Martin Hayward Smith's house while he nursed her back to health (page 60). Once she was well, he returned her to the fields

Martin Hayward Smith; Lukas Gajda/Dreamstime; John Glover/GAP Photos; John Millar

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