

Mountain hares on Dartmoor

As part of our task to make a case for re-introducing the mountain hare to Dartmoor we need to establish how long ago mountain hares were on the Moor and why they became extinct. Mountain hare remains are found in the Joint Mitnor cave at Buckfastleigh dating between 114,000 and 131,000 years ago and it is likely they were on Dartmoor during that period. The Natural History Museum informs us that in the late Mesolithic period (7,000 to 5,000 years ago) England and Wales had become covered in mature deciduous woodland which did not suit mountain hares and they probably died out on Dartmoor owing to the loss of their grassland habitat. The last remnants of this woodland on Dartmoor are Wistman's Wood on the West Dart River, Pile's Copse on the River Erme and Black Tor Beare on the West Okement River. Incidentally, the NHM says that contrary to popular belief that the brown hare was introduced to Britain by the Romans 2,000 years ago they probably arrived during the Bronze Age around 3,000 years ago and there is evidence that they came here even earlier.

SWAFH works for hares but supports its wildlife friends when the occasion arises and with the coming of the bonfire season our thoughts turn to hibernating hedgehogs. So here are some recommendations to minimise the bonfire hazard as far as possible. If you are involved with a community event please ensure the organisers are informed:

Build your bonfire on the day it is to be lit so there is less chance of hedgehogs taking up residence in your pile. Make your pile of material elsewhere and re-site the entire stack before lighting. Always search the bonfire for hibernating creatures by lifting the base of the pile with a broom handle and using a torch to look inside. Listen carefully for hissing sounds when investigating your pile this is the noise hedgehogs make when disturbed. If you find a hedgehog, move them somewhere safe and away from the fire. Before the night of the fire, make an alternative hedgehog home in a different part of the garden by raking up leaves and grass cuttings. If a large bonfire has to be built in advance, place outward sloping chicken wire held in by stakes all around the bottom to make it difficult to climb.

Healthy hare population on farm two miles from Crediton

The farmer attributes this to low fox numbers and the chicory he grows. Adult, healthy hares are 50% faster than a fox and only by stealth and ambush does he have any chance of taking one. Most fox predation is on the leverets. Large fields enable hares to take advantage of their speed but may mean they have to travel further to feed, so there is probably an optimum field size.

Drone update

We continue to search for one best suited to carry the equipment required to detect hares and other wildlife concealed in grass fields before cutting machinery moves in. There remains the vexed question as to what to do with any creatures found, especially those dependent on parental care. It may be that in some cases we can do no more than keep the farmer informed. All views and ideas on this subject would be very gratefully received.

Cirencester Hare Festival

We are very concerned that this event gave the impression that all is well with Britain's hares, so we have conveyed the grim statistics to the Wiltshire & Gloucestershire Standard:-
75% national population decline since the 1960s, 390,000 shot annually (may have been reduced by Scotland's close season) 25-30% wounded but retrieved, 10% wounded and escaping to an unknown fate, at least 37,000 orphaned leverets dying of starvation. We have also taken the opportunity to mention the plight of the mountain hare – around 25,000 shot and snared in Scotland annually.

“Detested sport, that owes its pleasures to another's pain”

William Cowper 1731 - 1800