

Irish hares fall foul of modern farming trap

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Research from Queen's University Belfast has revealed the 20th century decline in the Irish hare population is almost certainly associated with changes in farming practices.

The Stormont Assembly voted to ban hare coursing in Northern Ireland last Tuesday (22nd June), but a recent study, funded by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and published in the international journal [Biological Conservation](#), suggests hares may join the ranks of other farmland species, such as the Corncrake, unless more is done to protect its habitat.

The research team, led by Dr Neil Reid, Quercus Centre Manager in Queen's School of Biological Sciences, has shown that hares require an intricate patchwork quilt of good quality grassland for feeding, and tall uneven vegetation, such as rushes, for hiding and sleeping.

Dr Reid explained: "Hares may mistake the tall grass of silage fields as a good spot for lying-up and giving birth. Silage is harvested during the peak period when leverets are born in late spring and early summer and the machinery used may trap and kill young hares, driving local population declines year after year. Hares have fallen foul of an ecological trap."

The researchers tagged a population of hares in South Armagh with radio-transmitters, allowing them to track their every move. They followed the animals day and night for an entire year to see how they changed their habitat preferences. The researchers found that during late spring and early summer they increased their use of long grass destined to be cut for silage.

Dr Reid said: "On a day-to-day basis, hares are remarkably boring creatures to follow. They don't move far and during the daytime they do very little. This is rather worrying, however, if they settle in unsuitable habitat that may present life threatening risks at a certain time of year. We may have forty shades of green in Ireland but we have created

what amounts to a desert of grass. Variety is the spice of life. Wildlife can't survive in a pristinely manicured landscape of only one habitat."

Dr Reid added: "Fields are frequently mowed from the edge to the centre for convenience but it surely can't be that difficult to do it the other way around? Adopting 'hare-friendly' mowing regimes, similar to those adopted to minimise the impact of harvesting on ground nesting birds, may help mitigate the effects. Unfortunately, leverets tend not to run so it may not work, but it's worth testing."

The new Northern Ireland Countryside Management Schemes (NICMS), implemented by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), now includes a specific measure to target the Irish hare called the 'delayed cutting and grazing' option. Farmers who sign up will receive hectare payments for postponing the cutting of silage until after the 1st July and for maintaining rushy field margins.

Provided by Queen's University Belfast

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