



HL Bill 52 of 2024–25

## Hares (Close Season) Bill [HL]

**Author:** Nicole Winchester

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Baroness Helic (Conservative) introduced her private member's bill, the [Hares \(Close Season\) Bill \[HL\]](#), in the House of Lords on 28 November 2024. The bill is currently awaiting a date for its second reading.

The bill would make it an offence to intentionally or recklessly kill, injure or take any hare during the close season, which would run from 1 February to 30 September each year. A person found guilty of this offence would be liable for up to six months' imprisonment, a fine, or both. The bill would include several exemptions from the offence. It would also repeal the Hares Preservation Act 1892.

Currently, in England and Wales there is no close season where it is prohibited to kill hares. However, close seasons are currently in place in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust has published a voluntary code of practice which advises against the killing of brown hares between 1 March to 31 July unless they are causing serious crop damage.





Estimates of the number of hares in the UK vary with challenges in accurately counting their number. There has also been disagreement about whether brown hare populations are increasing. The British Trust for Ornithology has reported an increase in recent years, while the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Hare Preservation Trust have reported declines. The British Association for Shooting and Conservation has said that numbers have remained relatively stable since the 1990s.

Baroness Helic has argued that a close season would protect hare populations. She has said that current voluntary guidance is “often ignored in practice” and covers the wrong time frame, with unregulated shooting disrupting population recovery during the breeding season. Other organisations have agreed with Baroness Helic and several parliamentarians have previously looked to introduce similar legislation. However, other stakeholders have argued against the introduction of a close season with some saying there is no evidence it would help brown hare populations.

## I. **What is the background to the bill?**

### I.1 **Hares in the UK**

There are three types of hare found in the UK:<sup>1</sup>

- **Brown hares** are the most common type of hare and are found on arable farmland and large, flat expanses of grassland.

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<sup>1</sup> BBC Countryfile, [‘Hare guide: How to identify and where to see’](#), 28 February 2023.



- **Mountain hares** are found in Scotland and the north of England, largely in upland areas. They are smaller than brown hares and are able to turn white in winter to blend in with the snow. The Scottish mountain hare is a subspecies which is native to the Highlands. They are also known as blue hares due to the colour of their coat during the transition to winter.
- **Irish hares** are found on the island of Ireland and are smaller than brown hares. However, unlike mountain hares they rarely change colour.

## 1.2 Population estimates

There is uncertainty about the number of hares in the UK due to difficulties in counting the animal.<sup>2</sup> As a result, population estimates have varied. For example, Natural England's 2018 review had a central estimate of 579,000 brown hares in Great Britain. However, this was its best estimate based on a 95% confidence limit which ran from 427,000 to 1,990,000.<sup>3</sup> The review also outlined that the central estimate for the mountain hare population was 135,000 for Great Britain, with a lower estimate of 81,000 and an upper estimate of 526,000.<sup>4</sup> In 2022, a Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) press release contained the estimate that there were less than half a million brown hares in England.<sup>5</sup> It did not provide an estimate for mountain hares.

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<sup>2</sup> BBC News, '[Dunging the maths: How to count elusive mountain hares](#)', 26 January 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Natural England, '[A review of the population and conservation status of British mammals: Technical summary](#)', 13 June 2018, p 15; and '[IUCN: Compliant red list assessment for Britain's terrestrial mammals](#)', 19 March 2019 [Excel file download].

<sup>4</sup> As above.

<sup>5</sup> Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, '[New legislation to crack down on illegal hare coursing now in force](#)', 1 August 2022.



Due to the difficulties in accurately counting brown hares, some organisations focus on estimating population trends. These studies look at estimating changes in an animal's population rather than trying to arrive at a figure for the total population. The British Trust for Ornithology's (BTO) 'Breeding bird survey', which records certain mammals as well as birds, includes an index that looks at relative change rather than estimates of the whole population.<sup>6</sup> It uses 1995 as the base year. The survey includes data on both brown hares and mountain hares. The trust's most recent report, which covered 2023, was published in May 2024.<sup>7</sup> It reported that brown hares in England had seen a 54% increase in the last 10 years. However, brown hares in Wales had not shown the "same rapid increase" with the growth found to be slower. In Scotland, the brown hare population was found to have "remained relatively stable"; however, mountain hares had continued to decline. Alongside the report, the BTO produces mammal monitoring data in an interactive graph on its website.<sup>8</sup> This shows species each year compared to the 1995 baseline and can be filtered by region. It showed that the brown hare population had increased 48% from 1995 to 2023. For mountain hares it showed the population had decreased by 30% over the same period. A recent study by Natural England, focused solely on mountain hares, also found a decline in their numbers.<sup>9</sup> It reported that in the Peak District there had been a decline of 60% in eight years in the "main mountain hare hotspots".

In contrast to the BTO's trend estimates on brown hares, in 2022 a DEFRA press release stated that the number of brown hares in the UK had been declining. However, the department did not provide

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<sup>6</sup> British Trust for Ornithology, '[Breeding bird survey: Methodology and survey design](#)', accessed 14 April 2025.

<sup>7</sup> British Trust for Ornithology, '[The breeding bird survey 2023](#)', May 2024, p 28.

<sup>8</sup> British Trust for Ornithology, '[Mammal monitoring](#)', accessed 9 April 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Natural England, '[Mountain hares in decline: New research reveals diminishing numbers in the Peak District](#)', 28 March 2025.



information on the data behind this trend.<sup>10</sup> The Hare Preservation Trust has also published information on population trends in an article about the history of brown hares on its website, which it argued showed there had been a decrease in numbers.<sup>11</sup> It said that during the late 1800s there were around 4 million brown hares in Britain. It argued that recent surveys had shown a decline of 80% during the past 100 years, with this trend ongoing. It said that in some areas, such as the South West, brown hares were so rare they may even be locally extinct. However, the article did not provide sources for its data.

The British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) has agreed that hare populations declined during the 20th century. However, it also argued that game bag records and other surveys showed that the number of hares has “generally remained stable since the 1990s”.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.3 Threats to hare populations

Natural England’s 2018 review said that the “drivers of change” in the number of brown hares were changes to agricultural practices and competition (with livestock potentially reducing food and shelter opportunities), culling and climate change.<sup>13</sup> For mountain hares, it said drivers of change were altered land use and fragmentation, culling and hybridisation with and competitive exclusion by brown hares.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, ‘[New legislation to crack down on illegal hare coursing now in force](#)’, 1 August 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Hare Preservation Trust, ‘[Brown hare history and status](#)’, accessed 10 April 2025.

<sup>12</sup> British Association for Shooting and Conservation, ‘[Brown hares: England only](#)’, accessed 10 April 2025.

<sup>13</sup> Natural England, ‘[A review of the population and conservation status of British mammals: Technical summary](#)’, 13 June 2018, p 15.

<sup>14</sup> As above, p 16.



The 2018 review also highlighted the national gamebag census which gathers information on the number of quarry species shot each year.<sup>15</sup> It reported a 38% increase in brown hare culls in Britain between 2005 and 2009 but a 40% decline in the number of mountain hares culled in the same period. Academic research has argued that hunting of hares in February in England and Wales “leads to a profoundly damaging combination of population shrinkage” and the orphaning of leverets.<sup>16</sup>

While the BASC has acknowledged problems faced by hares in some areas, it also argued that in the right conditions hares can multiply quickly and become “locally abundant to the point of being a pest”.<sup>17</sup>

The Hare Preservation Trust has argued that the reasons behind the decline of hare populations are not “entirely clear”.<sup>18</sup> However, it cited the intensification of agriculture as having been a major factor due to the species’ need for constant food supply throughout the year. It said this can only be provided by “landscapes rich in biodiversity”. It also said that changes in the pattern of land use are unhelpful, and that the destruction of hedgerows has deprived them of a source of food and shelter. In addition, hares can be killed by farming practices such as pesticide spraying, with leverets sometimes killed by grass mowing machinery.

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<sup>15</sup> As above, p 15; and Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, ‘[National gamebag census](#)’, accessed 10 April 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Butterworth et al, ‘[Minimising orphaning in the brown hare \*Lepus europaeus\* in England and Wales: Should a close season be introduced?](#)’, *Wildlife Biology*, 1 January 2017, vol 2017, issue 1; and Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, ‘[GWCT national gamebag census and tracking mammals partnership](#)’, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> British Association for Shooting and Conservation, ‘[Brown hares: England only](#)’, accessed 10 April 2025.

<sup>18</sup> Hare Preservation Trust, ‘[Brown hare history and status](#)’, accessed 10 April 2025.



## I.4 Conservation targets

The UK's 1994 'Biodiversity action plan' listed brown hares as a priority species.<sup>19</sup> They were chosen because their species and habitats were amongst those that were identified as being the most threatened. The list was updated in 2007, with brown hares remaining a priority species.<sup>20</sup> More recently, brown hares were included as an indicator species under regulations implementing the Environment Act 2021's legally binding biodiversity targets. These targets include halting the decline in species abundance by 2030 and reversing declines by 2042.<sup>21</sup>

On a global level, the European hare was listed as a species of 'least concern' on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) red list of threatened species 2019, although this stated the species population was decreasing.<sup>22</sup>

## I.5 Current legislation

Hares are defined as 'ground game' by the [Ground Game Act 1880](#). Under this act, landowners have the right to take or kill ground game.

A 'close season' is a period of the year when it is prohibited to kill certain game or fish.<sup>23</sup> There is currently no close season for hares in England and Wales. However, close seasons are legislated for in the

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<sup>19</sup> Joint Nature Conservation Committee, '[UK biodiversity action plan](#)', 9 May 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Joint Nature Conservation Committee, '[UK biodiversity action plan: List of UK BAP priority terrestrial mammal species](#)', 2007.

<sup>21</sup> [Schedule 2 of the Environmental Targets \(Biodiversity\) \(England\) Regulations 2023](#) and the related [explanatory memorandum](#).

<sup>22</sup> IUCN Red List, '[European hare \(\*Lepus europaeus\*\)](#)', 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Collins Dictionary, '[Definition of 'close season'](#)', accessed 10 April 2025.



other devolved nations:

- In Northern Ireland, the close season runs from 1 February to 11 August each year.<sup>24</sup>
- In Scotland, the close season for brown hares runs from 1 February to 30 September. However, mountain hares are protected and cannot be shot without a licence.<sup>25</sup>

The [Hares Preservation Act 1892](#) made it an offence to sell, or expose for sale, any hare or leveret between March and July. This act does not apply to foreign hares imported into Britain.

## 1.6 Voluntary code of practice

The Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, in association with several other organisations, has published a voluntary code of practice for brown hare management and welfare in England.<sup>26</sup> On the timing of hare management, this code recommends that:

Control to prevent damage to crops should be carried out in the winter months of January and February when crops and vegetation are low and hares are easily visible. These months

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<sup>24</sup> British Association for Shooting and Conservation, '[Shooting seasons: Game and wildfowl](#)', accessed 10 April 2025.

<sup>25</sup> [Section 6 of the Wildlife and Natural Environment \(Scotland\) Act 2011](#); and Nature Scot, '[Protected species: Hares](#)', last updated 20 January 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, '[Code of practice for brown hare management and welfare in England](#)', March 2013. This document was published in association with the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, the Country Land and Business Association, the Countryside Alliance, the Moorland Association, the National Gamekeepers' Organisation, and the Tenant Farmers Association.





avoid the main breeding season and thereby reduce any risk to dependent young. Control later in the spring should be avoided if possible.<sup>27</sup>

The code also said that from 1 March to 31 July, hares should only be killed if they are causing serious crop damage as opposed to being a potential risk.<sup>28</sup> It said this prevents the orphaning of young during the hare's main breeding season. In addition, the code advises that hare shoots should not take place after the end of February other than in exceptional circumstances.<sup>29</sup>

## **1.7 Calls for a change in the law**

### **1.7.1 Baroness Helic**

Writing for *The House* magazine, Baroness Helic set out her arguments for the creation of a close season for hare shooting in England and Wales.<sup>30</sup> She explained that currently brown hares are the “only game species in England and Wales that can be shot year-round with few legal restrictions”. She also noted that there are close seasons in Scotland, Northern Ireland and “most European countries”.

Baroness Helic argued that the lack of protection given to hares in England and Wales is “particularly concerning given the sharp decline

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<sup>27</sup> Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, '[Code of practice for brown hare management and welfare in England](#)', March 2013, p 3.

<sup>28</sup> As above, p 5.

<sup>29</sup> As above.

<sup>30</sup> Baroness Helic, '[We must establish a close season on hare shooting in England and Wales to halt species' decline](#)', *The House*, 27 January 2025.



in hare populations over the past centuries”.<sup>31</sup> She said that this decline had been driven by changes in farming practices and “unsustainable exploitation through shooting, poaching and coursing”. Baroness Helic argued that “unregulated shooting poses a risk of localised extinction and severely disrupts hare population recovery”.

Addressing the argument that the shooting industry is self-regulating, Baroness Helic said the code of practice covers the wrong period when many hares will be pregnant or nursing young. She also noted that the guidance is voluntary and argued that it is “often ignored in practice”. In addition, Baroness Helic argued that concerns about hares being agricultural pests are “often exaggerated to justify destructive shooting practices” and that a close season would not hinder farmers from managing genuine crop damage. She also argued that recent legislation to combat hare coursing, a criminal activity distinct from commercial hare shooting, should not serve as “an excuse to overlook welfare and conservation concerns surrounding hare shooting”.

Concluding, Baroness Helic said that a close season would prevent the killing of pregnant and nursing hares, and the subsequent starvation of dependent leverets, while supporting the UK’s biodiversity targets.<sup>32</sup>

### **1.7.2 Other organisations**

Wildlife and Countryside Link, the largest environmental and wildlife coalition in England, has also called for the introduction of a time-limited shooting season for brown hares to prevent shooting in the

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<sup>31</sup> As above.

<sup>32</sup> As above.

breeding season.<sup>33</sup> The coalition has said that the species is of conservation concern and that current rules on shooting are:

[...] a double blow to hare populations, with losses from animals killed directly being matched by the consequent mortality amongst infant hares (leverets) orphaned in the breeding season.<sup>34</sup>

It has also argued that the “outdated” Hares Preservation Act 1892, which made it an offence to sell any hare or leveret from the beginning of March to the end of July, should be repealed.<sup>35</sup> It said that the legislation intended to remove the financial incentive of hunting hares during their main breeding season but is no longer effective due to the creation of freezer technology and because modern-day shoots are primarily designed to provide sport rather than food.

In addition, Wildlife and Countryside Link has criticised the voluntary code of practice. It has raised concerns about the voluntary nature of the guidance and argued that it did not recognise that many hares are pregnant or nursing young in February.<sup>36</sup> It also said that it failed to heed the advice of the Game Conservancy Trust, which it said had stated “as far back as 2006” that hares should not be shot in late winter unless there had been evidence of crop damage as a February shoot can “remove 60% of the breeding stock”.

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<sup>33</sup> Wildlife and Countryside Link, [‘Global biodiversity framework: 2024 report on policy progress towards targets in England’](#), 2024, p 16.

<sup>34</sup> As above.

<sup>35</sup> Wildlife and Countryside Link, [‘Hares \(Close Season\) Bill: Ahead of second reading’](#), January 2025, p 2.

<sup>36</sup> As above, p 3.



Since 2011, the organisation Conservatives Against Fox Hunting has campaigned for the introduction of a closed season in England and Wales.<sup>37</sup> It has argued that “only a legally binding closed season can offer real protection” and that it would increase hare populations.

### 1.7.3 Previous private members’ bills

Several previous private members’ bills have looked to introduce a close season for brown hares. However, none have been successful. Most recently, in the 2022–23 parliamentary session, Anthony Browne (then Conservative MP for South Cambridgeshire) introduced a bill with the same name as the current bill.<sup>38</sup> Mr Browne’s bill received its first reading in the House of Commons but did not progress further. Other parliamentarians who have tabled similar private members’ bills include:

- Richard Fuller (2021) Conservative MP for North Bedfordshire<sup>39</sup>
- Lord Randall of Uxbridge (Conservative) (2020)<sup>40</sup>
- George Eustice (2019) then Conservative MP for Camborne and Redruth<sup>41</sup>
- Lord Randall of Uxbridge (2014) then Conservative MP for Uxbridge and South Ruislip<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation, ‘[Telegraph: Ban on hare shooting under consideration by government](#)’, 18 March 2021.

<sup>38</sup> UK Parliament, ‘[Hares \(Close Season\) Bill 2022–23](#)’, updated 17 November 2022.

<sup>39</sup> UK Parliament, ‘[Hares \(Close Season\) Bill 2021–22](#)’, updated 24 February 2022.

<sup>40</sup> UK Parliament, ‘[Hares Preservation Bill \[HL\]](#)’, updated 5 May 2021.

<sup>41</sup> UK Parliament, ‘[Hares Preservation Bill](#)’, updated 15 May 2019.

<sup>42</sup> UK Parliament, ‘[Brown Hare \(Protection\) Bill](#)’, updated 15 May 2014.



## 1.8 Opposition to a close season

In 2021, the director of policy for the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, Dr Alastair Leake, argued against the introduction of a closed season.<sup>43</sup> He said that the move would result in farmers having to anticipate in advance “the unpredictable level of crop damage likely to occur and take pre-emptive action during the open season”. Dr Leake argued that due to this a close season along with “an upsurge in illegal hare coursing” would create a “bleak prospect for the conservation status of this treasured species”.

In 2019, the then Conservative government said there was no evidence that a close season would significantly benefit the conservation status of brown hares.<sup>44</sup> It said that the population of brown hares was believed to be stable, and that the majority of shooting occurred in regions where brown hares were locally abundant and therefore led to no long-term impact on hare populations. It also argued that the voluntary code of practice offered protection.

## 1.9 Government policy

In recent weeks, the Labour government has been asked several parliamentary questions about whether it planned to introduce a close season.<sup>45</sup> In response to these questions the minister for nature,

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<sup>43</sup> Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, [‘Close season would be ‘bleak prospect’ for brown hares: Our letter in the Telegraph’](#), 22 March 2021.

<sup>44</sup> House of Lords, [‘Written question: Hares: Conservation \(HL12537\)’](#), 16 January 2019.

<sup>45</sup> House of Commons, [‘Written question: Hare coursing \(41785\)’](#), 3 April 2025; House of Commons, [‘Written question: Hares: Animal welfare \(41590\)’](#), 1 April 2025; and House of Commons, [‘Written question: Hares: Conservation \(39221\)’](#), 26 March 2025.



Mary Creagh, said:

While the government has no immediate plan to introduce a close season for hares in England, the policy remains under consideration as part of the government's plans to introduce the most ambitious programme for animal welfare in a generation.<sup>46</sup>

Ms Creagh also noted that due to devolution, her response related to England only, with “the potential for relevant policy to extend and apply to Wales”.

The previous Conservative government had considered whether to legislate on a closed season for brown hares.<sup>47</sup> However, it did not bring forward legislation.

## 2. What would the bill do?

**Clause 1** would make it an offence to intentionally or recklessly kill, injure or take any hare or leveret in the close season, which would run from 1 February to 30 September each year.

**Clause 2** would establish that a person guilty of the above offence would be liable on summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months, a fine, or both.

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<sup>46</sup> House of Commons, '[Written question: Hare coursing \(41785\)](#)', 3 April 2025.

<sup>47</sup> Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, '[Action plan for animal welfare](#)', 12 May 2021; and House of Lords, '[Written question: Hares: Conservation \(HL9067\)](#)', 12 July 2023.



**Clause 3** would set out exemptions to the offence. It would prevent a landowner, lawful occupier, or a person authorised by either a landowner or lawful occupier (an 'authorised person') from being guilty of the offence if they could show their action was necessary for the purpose of preventing serious damage to crops on the land owned or occupied. To use this defence, they would have to show that:

- they had reasonable grounds for believing that hares of the same species had caused serious damage to crops on the land;
- it was likely that further damage would be caused to the crops and the damage was likely to be serious;
- non-lethal methods had failed; and
- their action was necessary and proportionate for the purpose of preventing the damage.

To be entitled to the above defence, an authorised person would have to show that they had obtained a licence under [section 16 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981](#), prior to taking action.

A person would also not be guilty if they showed that the animal had been so seriously disabled, otherwise than by their lawful act, that there was no reasonable chance of it recovering. In addition, they would not commit the offence if they had taken the animal solely for the purpose of tending it and releasing it when it was no longer disabled.

**Clause 4** would repeal the Hares Preservation Act 1892.



**Clause 5** would provide for the bill's territorial extent, commencement and short title. It would extend to England and Wales and come into force one month after it had been passed.

## 2.1 Member's explanatory statement

Explaining her rationale for the bill, Baroness Helic said:

My bill aims to replace the outdated Hares Preservation Act 1892 and introduce a legally binding close season from 1 February to 30 September in England and Wales.

This close season aligns with the hares' breeding period from February to October, when shooting adult hares leaves leverets motherless and vulnerable to starvation and predation. The measure is consistent with Natural England's wildlife management advice, which recommends avoiding species control during peak breeding seasons unless genuinely essential.

According to published research, shooting hares in February, as is currently commonly practiced in England, leads to a profoundly damaging combination of population shrinkage and orphaning of leverets with consequent animal welfare impacts and poor population recovery outcomes.<sup>48</sup> A close season from the start of February to the start of October provides capacity for population growth, and results in markedly reduced numbers of dependent juveniles being orphaned.

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<sup>48</sup> Andrew Butterworth et al, '[Minimising orphaning in the brown hare \*Lepus europaeus\* in England and Wales: Should a close season be introduced?](#)', *Wildlife Biology*, 1 January 2017, vol 2017, issue 1 (reference provided by Baroness Helic to the House of Lords Library).





While industry guidance advises against shooting hares after February, this voluntary measure is unenforceable and ignores that many hares are still pregnant or nursing during this time.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, modern shoots are primarily conducted for sport rather than meat sales.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, '[Code of practice for brown hare management and welfare in England](#)', March 2013 (reference provided by Baroness Helic to the House of Lords Library).

<sup>50</sup> Text provided by Baroness Helic to the House of Lords Library.

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