

The Hare and the Rabbit

The fast and the fragile

Hares and rabbits have succeeded in colonising a vast range of habitats, not only through evolution, but also because of the interference of man.

As country cousins from a prolific and diverse family, the fresh and cooler months have permitted us a glimpse of the rabbits at play on the lawns, in the playground and on the courses, and of the hares leaping and sprinting amongst the dunes.

Almost domesticated and teasing us with their proximity, the rabbits and hares nevertheless remain distant and detached. Their large mobile ears protect the delicate and precise hearing mechanism that safeguards them from rapid golf ball fire and unwanted advances of persons and predators.

With few exceptions, the hares and rabbits are most active in the evening and during the night. The rabbits are usually congenial and gregarious by nature, the hares more detached and solitary. They are both territorial creatures although where territories overlap, they will usually share their feeding areas.

THE HARE

The greyish-brown coat of the hare provides effective camouflage when resting in its 'form' in the open, the tips of its long ears and top of its tail are black. Relying on its speed to escape its enemies, the hare's long and powerful hind legs equip it to outrun a greyhound. It may also make good use of camouflage by pressing itself against

the ground, with ears and fur flattened to its body as a predator approaches.

Hares as well as rabbits, will warn one another of danger, or presumed danger, by drumming their back feet on the ground, although the hare may also grind its teeth to produce a sound normally interpreted as a danger signal. The ears and limbs of the hare are longer than those of the rabbit, and its stilt-like action when running, distinguishes it from the rabbit's bobbing gait. In early spring, the normally introverted hare will join a band of others to chase, 'box' and spar amongst themselves in search of a partner. This activity is often affectionately known as the dance of 'mad March hare'.

The young hares, called leverets, are born in an open hollow or 'form' on the ground, their bodies completely covered with fur, their eyes open, and able to move – if not actually run – a few minutes after birth. After a few days, the leverets may be moved to small 'forms' of their own, although their mother will visit them at night when she will stay with each one just long enough to feed it.

The rest of the time she watches over them from a distance, ready to protect them if they are attacked – sometimes running great distances in order to draw the predator away from her young.

THE RABBIT

The young rabbits, called kittens, are born to the security of a nest specially lined with their mother's fur, completely

hairless, blind and unable to walk. The kittens will be protected from intruders by being walled up in a nursery in the warren. The entrance to the nursery will be hidden with earth, sand or dry grass. At about ten days old, the youngsters' eyes will open, and they will soon leave the nursery to explore. In the sand dunes, the burrows are easily excavated and often spread apart in order to reduce competition for food.

Individual territorial boundaries are marked with the secretions of scent glands located under the chin, and more obviously by piles of droppings near the burrow's entrance. Born with the outstanding disadvantage of being deliciously tasty, the rabbit is a favourite food for most carnivores.

They are often bred for their meat and their fur – 'coney' or 'angora' – as well as to provide 'sport' for hunters.

As a small, easy to handle, docile and endearing creature, the rabbit has become a firm favourite as a pet and, together with the hare, continues to delight our children as captivating and charming fictional characters.

Our hares and rabbits will continue to provide endless pleasure as only wildlife can. As spectators to our tennis matches, admirers of our golf swing or as our unsolicited gardeners, long may they continue to defy each natural predator, our vehicles and our progress ... and remain free and healthy for as long as our admiration and awareness allows.

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