

IRISH MOUNTAIN HARE



The Irish mountain hare (*Lepus timidus hibernicus*) is unique to Ireland appearing after the last ice age. It is one of our few native **mammals**; unlike its much smaller cousin the rabbit, which was **introduced** to Ireland by the Normans in the 12th century. The Irish mountain hare differs from mountain hares found in Britain and the European continent in that it does not produce a white coat

in winter, a result of our milder winter climate. Hares have been protected in Ireland since 1930. Found all over Ireland in upland bogs, coastal dune complexes and salt marshes, or in lowland pastures with short grass. They are usually **solitary animals** and are regularly seen in the upland and lowland bogs of the National Park.

The females are about 10% larger than the males, weighing approximately 3kg and 60cm long. Hares have long ears and powerful hind legs. They have a reddish-brown coat that turns greyish-brown in winter. They rarely communicate except in faint snorts and the odd screaming **distress call**. Hares are **herbivores** and have a diet that consists mostly of grasses and other plants.

Hares have 360 degree vision, with eyes set on the side of their head; perfect for watching out for predators like the red fox. They can reach top speeds of 70km per hour and are able to avoid capture from predators with swift changes in direction. Their white tail is used to distract the predator when they switch direction, making it difficult for predators to focus on their body movements, as well as acting as a warning signal of danger to other hares when they run by.

Unlike rabbits hares do not burrow; instead they use forms for resting. Forms are made in sheltered locations and are shallow depressions in dense vegetation such as heather, tall grass or rushes. It is within these forms that the female creates a grass-lined nest for the newly born baby hares or leverets. Breeding time is between January and August, depending on food availability. In springtime males are seen sparring and kicking. This is part of the breeding ritual, where males compete for females. Hares can produce up to 3 **litters** a year, each with about 4 leverets. This is rare in nature and usually only two litters are produced. Leverets weigh 100g at birth and are born covered in fur, with their eyes open and very independent. They have all their senses and spend most of the day grazing, only returning to suckle on the mother's milk once a day. They are **weaned** at 3 weeks of age.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Mammals: an animal that feeds its young with milk.

Introduced: a non-native or exotic creature that has been brought to a habitat by humans.

Solitary animals: an animal that spends most of its life without any others of its kind, except for when they breed or raise their young.

Distress call: the noise an animal makes when it feels threatened or it wants to alert others of approaching danger.

Herbivores: an animal that has a diet consisting mainly of plant vegetation.

Litter: a number of babies born from one mother at the same time.

Weaned: when a baby no longer requires its mother's milk, instead it eats more solid food.

QUIZ SHEET

1. How fast can a hare run?

2. When did hares appear in Ireland?

3. What colour is a hare in winter?

4. What time of year are you most likely to see hares sparring?

5. How many babies can a hare have in a litter?

6. When are leverets weaned?

7. What is the body length of a hare?

8. What kind of diet does a hare have?

9. Where do hares rest?

10. What areas of the National Park are you most likely to find hares?
