

Hares (Close Season) Bill: ahead of second reading

January 2025

This briefing is on behalf of nature and animal welfare coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link ([Link](#)) and covers the need for a close season for hare shooting in England and Wales.

Background

The Hares (Close Season) Bill was introduced by Baroness Helic in the House of Lords on the 28th November 2024 as a Private Members Bill.¹ There is as yet no date scheduled for Second Reading.

If passed, the bill will deliver two outcomes:

- 1) Establish a close season prohibiting the killing or taking of hares from the 1st February to 30th September in England and Wales, matching the dates of the existing closed season in Scotland.²
- 2) Replace the Hares Preservation Act (1892), which prohibited the sale of hares between the 1st March and the end of July, but is now outdated and not regularly enforced.

This bill represents the 6th Private Members Bill of its kind to have been presented to Parliament since 2014 alone. Most recently, a close season was tabled in the House of Commons by Conservative MP Anthony Browne in 2022³ and Richard Fuller in 2021.⁴ Before that, John Randall (Lord Randall of Uxbridge) tabled a Bill in the Lords in 2020⁵, George Eustice in the Commons in 2019⁶ and John Randall when he was still an MP in the Commons with a Brown Hare (Protection) Bill in 2014.⁷ While it is clear that there is persistent interest among Parliamentarians and support among the wider public, all these bills failed to reach the statute book because of a lack of parliamentary time, as is the fate of so many Private Members Bills. We urge peers to support Baroness Helic's Bill, and to ask Ministers to give Government backing to this important nature reform.

¹ <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3899>

² <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/69/section/10A>

³ <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3236>

⁴ <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3086>

⁵ <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2582>

⁶ <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2402>

⁷ <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/1356>

Existing legislative context surrounding hares

Hares are defined as ‘ground game’ by the Ground Game Act (1880), which provides a statutory right to landowners to take or kill ground game. Without a close season the animals can be killed all year round, except on Sundays and Christmas Day.

Hares are the only ‘game’ animals in England and Wales to not already have a close season, and England and Wales are also the only countries in the UK and most of Europe in which no such close season operates for hares. In Scotland, Mountain hares are already protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) so cannot be shot or harmed at any time of the year⁸, and Scotland introduced a close season for brown hares under the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011, which protects brown hares from shooting from 1st February to the end of September.

The new bill seeks to replace the existing Hares Preservation Act (1892) which makes it an offence to sell any hare or leveret (young hare) from the beginning of March to end of July. This outdated piece of legislation was introduced with good intentions of removing the financial incentive to hunt hares during their main breeding season but is no longer effective since the introduction of freezer technology, and because modern day shoots are not primarily designed to provide meat for sale but rather cruelly for sport. As former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs George Eustice said in the debate on Hares Preservation in May 2019 “*the 1892 Act is hopelessly out of date; it is no longer effective. It is, indeed, no longer even enforced.*”⁹

Why does a close season for hares need to be enshrined in law?

A charismatic small mammal of the countryside, the brown hare is one of the indicator species for the Government’s legally binding targets in England to halt the decline in species abundance by 2030 and reverse declines by 2042.¹⁰ Hares were also listed as a priority species in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan in 1994¹¹ as a result of an estimated 80% decline in numbers over the past century, due to habitat deterioration and loss caused by land use changes and

⁸ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/69/schedule/5>

⁹ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2019-05-14/debates/CD64A08F-AA23-48A7-894B-1E7884229A7E/HaresPreservation>

¹⁰ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2023/91/schedule/2/made>

¹¹ [https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/uk-bap/#:~:text=The%20UK%20Biodiversity%20Action%20Plan%20\(UK%20BAP\)%20was%20published%20in,1992%20in%20Rio%20de%20Janeiro.](https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/uk-bap/#:~:text=The%20UK%20Biodiversity%20Action%20Plan%20(UK%20BAP)%20was%20published%20in,1992%20in%20Rio%20de%20Janeiro.)

agriculture intensification, as well as widespread persecution.¹² The brown hare population in 2022 was thought it to be less than 500,000 individuals in the UK¹³, with mountain hares now existing in just one isolated population in England, the Peak District, with far fewer numbers than previously estimated.¹⁴

A legally binding close season, as proposed by Baroness Helic, would prevent the killing of any brown or mountain hare in England and Wales between the 1st February and the 30th September, except under licence to prevent serious crop damage. The duration for the closed season is based on the breeding season during which leverets are dependent on their mother for around three to four weeks after birth and will not survive if she is needlessly killed for sport. Industry guidance already exists, which recommends that shoots should be conducted before the end of February to prevent the orphaning of young leverets, however the guidance is voluntary so there is no obligation for landowners or others to follow it, and it fails to recognise that many hares are pregnant or nursing young in February, and fails to heed the advice of the Game Conservancy Trust which stated as far back as 2006 that hares shouldn't be shot in late winter except where there is evidence of crop damage, recognising that "A February hare shoot can remove 60% of the breeding stock". The proposed legislation would help to recover hare populations while also markedly reducing widespread animal suffering.¹⁵

A close season has been operating in the rest of the UK and most of Europe for some time. It is nonsensical for England and Wales to leave their hare populations vulnerable to shooting all year, especially after the previous Government introduced much welcomed tougher sentences for hare coursing through the Police, Crime Sentencing and Courts Act (2022).¹⁶

Passing this Bill would provide a quick and non-contentious win for wildlife species which are under increasing pressure from predation, habitat loss and criminal activity. This measure has been introduced through Private Members Bills repeatedly over the past decade. Passing the Bill now would also ultimately save Parliamentary time as, unlike the declining numbers of British mammals, the issue isn't going away.

¹² <https://hare-preservation-trust.com/species-status/brown-hare-history-status/#:~:text=During%20the%20late%201800s%20there,may%20even%20be%20locally%20extinct.>

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-legislation-to-crack-down-on-illegal-hare-coursing-now-in-force#:~:text=Brown%20hares%20are%20widespread%20across,incluing%20poaching%20and%20habitat%20loss.>

¹⁴ <https://ptes.org/grants/uk-mammal-projects/mountain-hares-peak-district/>

¹⁵ Butterworth et al. 2017. <https://bioone.org/journals/wildlife-biology/volume-2017/issue-1/wlb.00279/Minimising-orphaning-in-the-brown-hare-Lepus-europaeus-in-England/10.2981/wlb.00279.full>

¹⁶ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/32/contents>

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 86 organisations to campaign for nature, climate, animal welfare and a healthy environment for everyone. Wildlife and Countryside Link is a registered charity number 1107460 and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales number 3889519.

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The following organisations have inputted into this briefing and support the Hare (close season) Bill:

Angling Trust

Born Free

Nature watch foundation

Hare preservation society

Humane Society International

Peoples Trust for Endangered Species

Wild Justice

League against cruel sports