

The Impact of Enclosed Hare Coursing on Irish hares

Mike Rendle January 2006



Executive Summary

1. This report does not deal specifically with the issue of animal cruelty involved in enclosed coursing. However, the author acknowledges that poor animal welfare associated with coursing is a matter of great concern to around 80% of the population of Ireland.^{1,2}
2. There is clear evidence to support a link between hare deaths caused by poor animal welfare and enclosed coursing, as carried out under Irish Coursing Club rules.
3. There is no evidence that the muzzling of dogs since 1993 has reduced hare deaths.
4. There is emerging evidence that enclosed coursing is responsible for a significant number of hare deaths in Ireland.
5. At some events actual hare deaths may be as high as 48% of the hares caught for coursing.
6. Irish hare numbers are low and the species is locally extinct in some areas of Ireland.
7. There is no evidence to support claims that coursing benefits Irish hares.
8. There is no evidence to support any association between coursing and higher hare numbers.
9. Hares are caught indiscriminately and, as they breed throughout most of the year, pregnant females and nursing mothers are taken.
 - If a nursing mother is taken from the wild, her leverets will die
 - Pregnant females may abort or give birth in captivity
 - Leverets born to these captive mothers are unlikely to survive
10. The hare population of Ireland as a whole is fragmented and potentially vulnerable to the cumulative effects of local extinction.
11. Coursing targets and depletes fragile local populations of Irish hares.
12. Effective permanent protection for hares within Wildlife Legislation will serve to underpin a wider conservation strategy and make a significant contribution to the long-term recovery of the Irish hare.

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Preface to this report

The author never intended, or expected, to be addressing the issue of hare coursing. The original objective was an investigation into the high mortality amongst neonate leverets that had been hand reared. That was, and still is, the subject of a separate report.

In the course of that investigation, the role of stress as a possible causative factor looked increasingly likely. When the author looked for related evidence and case studies, almost all of the information came from sources connected to, or involving, coursing in Ireland.

Coincidentally, at about the same time, coursing clubs and the Countryside Alliance were making claims about their positive role in Irish hare conservation. These claims were, at best, exaggerated, misleading and without any supporting evidence.

This report sets out the case that coursing makes no positive contribution to Irish hare conservation and that the Irish hare population should be protected from these activities. Given the uncertainty that exists about the long-term recovery of the Irish hare population, coursing should be prohibited on the basis of the Precautionary Principle alone.

Originally released in 2004, this report has been revised and updated to include additional information.

Mike Rendle, January 2006

Enclosed (or Park) hare coursing

Most hare coursing in Ireland takes the form of enclosed coursing. This is the practice of taking hares from the wild and coursing them with dogs within an enclosed area from which the hares cannot escape. In Ireland hares are caught, using nets, under licence from the relevant government department. The hares are then packed into shallow crates and transported to an enclosed paddock where they are 'trained' to run in a predetermined direction. The hares may be held in captivity for up to 6-8 weeks in advance of the coursing event. On the day of the event, one hare is released into the paddock and pursued by two muzzled dogs. The hare cannot escape from the enclosure although there is a small zone at the 'finish' end of the paddock that the dogs cannot enter (*the 'escape'*). However, as will be discussed later, this offers no escape nor does it constitute a safe area for the hare. The pursuit continues until the hare reaches and remains in the 'escape', both dogs are restrained or the hare is killed or injured. All coursing in Ireland takes place under the rules of the Irish Coursing Club, the sport's governing body. This provides a standard for the way hares are caught, handled and coursed across the whole of Ireland, irrespective of the jurisdiction.

The Irish hare

The Irish hare is a native species, which has been present in Ireland since the end of the last ice age around 10,000 years ago. This unique animal is arguably Ireland's oldest surviving mammal and recent research indicates that it may be a separate species. Brown or European hares (*Lepus europaeus*), known locally as 'thrush' hares, were introduced to the North of Ireland over a century ago but do not appear to have survived in significant numbers. However, the appearance of Irish and brown hares are easily confused and any policy or legislation should apply to both species. They live a relatively solitary existence and normally avoid human contact. The presence of humans can have a very disruptive effect on these shy animals that are sensitive to disturbance and are easily stressed. This is reflected in the Irish hare's Latin name, *Lepus timidus hibernicus*.

There is a lot of general confusion about Irish hares and many people believe them to be similar to rabbits, only bigger. They are related, as both belong to the family of Leporidae, but there are some important differences. Rabbits are common and may be found anywhere they can dig burrows. Rabbits are well known for prolific breeding and can reproduce from the age of three months. They can give birth every 31 days to a litter of around eight young.

Hares live, and give birth, entirely above the ground without the protection and shelter of burrows. This leaves them susceptible to environmental disturbance, especially from human activities. They have a much lower breeding rate than rabbits and do not breed until their second year. Those that do survive to breed will probably only have, at most, eight leverets in a year in optimum conditions. On average, only 25% of leverets are believed to survive their first year. A high breeding rate allows a species population to recover from low numbers, however this does not apply to Irish hares. The Irish hare population is only a fraction of the size of 30 years ago and hares are now locally extinct in some areas.^{3,4} All of this leaves Irish hares extremely vulnerable, especially when numbers are low.^{4,5}

Coursing clubs and Irish hare conservation

The Countryside Alliance promotes hare coursing as 'having a net benefit for Irish hares'.⁶ It has also been claimed that coursing clubs carry out sympathetic habitat management for hares but, in the absence of any supporting evidence, this would appear to be based on speculation. There is no evidence that coursing has any benefit whatsoever for Irish hares. Furthermore, a study carried out for the Joint Nature Conservation Committee⁷ concluded that: *'there was no association between coursing and higher hare numbers'*. The report went on to say *'at least some areas no longer held high enough hare populations to support traditional coursing meetings. During the survey a number of reports were received of hares being caught and transported to restock traditional coursing areas.'*

In 2002 Dungannon and District Coursing Club netted hares for a coursing meet. Hares were found at four sites ranging from County Armagh to the Stewartstown and Coagh areas, a total distance of 50 Km. Only eleven hares were caught,⁸ which appears to be indicative of extremely low numbers in areas under the control and management of coursing groups. At around the same time in County Monaghan in the Republic of Ireland, a wildlife ranger came upon 28 men netting hares. The hares were placed in a van and removed from the area. Subsequently two of the men were found guilty of offences under the Republic's Wildlife Act. They admitted catching the hares for the Dungannon and District Coursing Club based in the North.⁹

Coursing clubs are now forced to curtail or cancel events due to low numbers, or the poor physical condition of hares.¹⁰

When the supporters of coursing refer to their contribution to 'conservation', they are more likely to be referring to research. Conservation is an activity designed to have direct practical benefits for the species and its habitat. Research, on the other hand, is an information-gathering exercise that may, or may not, assist conservation policy-making. The Countryside Alliance and the Irish Coursing Club frequently refer to their role in these activities, but their actual contribution is greatly overstated. Coursing clubs have assisted with the Irish hare research carried out by Queen's University Belfast. This has included providing tissue samples from coursed hares for DNA analysis and allowing coursed hares to be radio-tracked.

Researchers have found evidence of transfer of genes between populations of Irish hares.¹¹ However much of the DNA material for this research has been provided by coursing clubs,¹¹ who themselves have been responsible for translocating hares over a period of time, thus introducing significant bias.

The coursing clubs also claim to carry out predator control, however there is no evidence to suggest that predators have been responsible for the decline in hare numbers. Neither is there any evidence that predator (fox) control makes any contribution to Irish hare conservation.

For a number of years, Irish coursing groups have had the opportunity to gather very important and useful data about Irish hares as part of their normal coursing activities. Given the large numbers of hares coursed in Ireland, such information gathering could have provided significant samples of basic but valuable data on Irish hares. However, there is no evidence, or data, to indicate any significant contribution to data collection by the Irish Coursing Club or any of its member clubs beyond that detailed above.

The real impact of coursing on Irish hares

The impact of coursing is often considered in terms of the individual hares that are caught and coursed. There is emerging evidence that this impact is much greater than previously disclosed. It is clear that actual hare deaths due to coursing are under-reported and there may be a number of reasons for this:

- The methods of recording hare deaths may lead to reporting discrepancies,
- Hare deaths are not publicised for fear of contradicting the assertion that '*dogs are muzzled and no hares are harmed*',
- Hare deaths can occur at any time from capture until well after release due to stress or capture myopathy.¹²

An indication of the real mortality rate may be found in coursing fixtures where the figures for hare deaths have been made available (Table 1 below). These events were subject to Irish Coursing Club regulations and it should be noted that although dogs have been muzzled since 1993, this does not appear to have reduced hare mortality.

Table 1			
<u>Year</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Hare deaths</u>	<u>% Mortality</u> (nearest 1%)
1992	Clonmel	37 hares died	20% mortality
1992	Clounanna	*	25% mortality
1993	Clounanna	48 Hares died	*
1998	Clare South	20 Hares died	38% mortality
2001	Abbeyfeale	14 Hares died	30% mortality
2001	Cavan & District	17 Hares died	21% mortality
2002	Dungannon	3 Hares died	30% mortality
2003	Wexford	† 40 Hares died	48% mortality

Notes
 Data from government sources.^{8,10}
 * Complete figures unavailable at time of writing.
 † These deaths attributed to stress by the reporting veterinary surgeon.¹⁸

It is often claimed that coursing emulates natural behaviour and that the hare 'enjoys' the chase,¹³ however this is an anthropomorphic interpretation of the hare's behaviour. In the wild, predators rely on the element of surprise to gain the advantage over the much faster hare. In response, the hare sits up to indicate that it sees the predator and the element of surprise has been lost.¹⁴

In coursing, proponents claim that the hare is 'waiting' for the dogs, however the hare pauses because it does not expect to be pursued. Neither does the pursuit reflect natural behaviour in the wild. The hare is confined within the enclosed paddock and cannot escape to open country. The 'escape', the zone that the dogs cannot enter, is no sanctuary for the hare. This is merely another, much smaller enclosure, which the hare realises offers no means of escape. This confinement in close proximity to the dogs with no chance of escape is one of

the factors of coursing that produces levels of stress that this animal would not normally experience in the wild and a likely outcome is *capture myopathy*.¹²

Capture myopathy is a life-threatening condition caused by stress and whether or not the hare is caught, its welfare is very poor during the chase and for periods afterwards which will be prolonged in some cases.¹⁵ Capture, handling, transport, confinement and coursing are all contributing factors. The onset of this condition can occur from point of capture, and death may occur suddenly or some time after exposure to trauma. The role of capture myopathy in hare mortality has become much clearer. The link between enclosed hare coursing and the factors responsible for capture myopathy is now indisputable.

While publicly extolling the 'harmless' nature of coursing, the coursing community has long been aware of the causes of stress and the threat that it poses to well-being and survival of the hares. The Irish Coursing Club's veterinary surgeon, JJ O'Sullivan, states that

*'it is impossible to completely avoid stress in hares once you manhandle them, and take them out of their natural environment. Stress can come in many shapes and forms and as long as you have the hare in captivity, he is prone to it - resulting in his disability and even death at times.'*¹⁶

Mr. O'Sullivan goes on to elaborate on causes of stress of netted hares as follows:

*'Stress can start from the very minute you get him out of his form until you land him in the net, followed by rough handling, boxing and transporting. Sudden environmental changes such as fluctuating temperatures and varying humidity - being hot and sweating in a bag and later over-crowded in boxes.'*¹⁶

Conclusive evidence of the link between capture myopathy and coursing was provided at an Irish Coursing Club event held at Wexford in December 2003. Of the eighty three hares coursed, forty individuals died – almost 50%.¹⁷ The reporting vet, Dr Peter Murphy, stated, *'under the influence of stress, the hare's immune system is compromised'*. He went on to say, *'Hares are significantly stressed when corralled and coursed, and this combination of circumstances has resulted in the deaths in this case'*.^{18,19}

It would be difficult to find a more compelling example of capture myopathy in hares caused directly by coursing.

The impact of coursing on the species

It is clear from the available data that significant numbers of hares die at the hands of the coursing community.^{10,17} However, the impact goes beyond the individual hares caught and there is a real cost to the local, and national, hare population.

Hares are caught indiscriminately and, since they breed throughout the year, pregnant females and nursing mothers are taken.^{4,20}

- If a nursing mother is taken from the wild her leverets will die
- Pregnant females may abort or give birth in captivity
- Leverets born to these captive mothers are unlikely to survive

In October 2004, 16 leverets were born to captive hares held for a coursing meet at Edenderry, County Offaly. These 'very young' leverets were taken to a nature reserve located at a former peat extraction site. Although this location was chosen with the best of intentions, it is most unlikely that any of the leverets would have survived without their mothers. It would be expected that, of these 66 hares, approximate half (33) would be

female.²¹ On this occasion, it is likely that around 8 of the 33 females gave birth in captivity. This is a significant proportion (25%) making it highly likely that some of the other captive hares were pregnant and that others had been nursing young when captured. This indicates that autumn births are not exceptional and that breeding hares need to be protected throughout the year.

Coursing also targets and depletes fragile local populations. Individuals may have a very small range – typically 10 Hectares.²² Low numbers, small range and limited dispersal means that removing any hares, especially breeding females, from a local population is potentially very damaging and may put a small group at risk from extinction. The hare population of Ireland as a whole is fragmented and potentially vulnerable to the cumulative effects of local extinction.²³

In 1993 a farming family in New Ross, County Wexford, reported on the impact that the activities of coursing groups was having on the local hare population.²⁴

'...(hares) are being captured for coursing or used for training greyhounds. This happens regularly on our farm, we often find unfortunate hares which have been entangled in nets for some time, some have broken bones protruding, some of these wounds are festering. The only thing we can do with these animals is to have them humanely destroyed. We used to enjoy the company of between forty and sixty hares but now there are only three or four.'

This level of loss to local populations is a recurring theme in anecdotal evidence. However, there are wider implications for the Irish hare population in general. As hare numbers become depleted, hares are netted for coursing over greater geographical areas thus targeting other local populations. It also takes the coursing groups longer to net sufficient numbers for meetings. As a result hares are kept in captivity for prolonged periods, for as long as six weeks,²⁵ resulting in unacceptable levels of captive stress and hare mortality.

It is clear that coursing has the potential to adversely affect the wild population of Irish hares in a number of ways, although it may be difficult to quantify the scale. However with an estimated 7,000 -10,000 hares expected to be caught by coursing clubs in Ireland, it is paramount that the environmental impact of these activities be assessed within the guidelines afforded by the *Precautionary Principle*.

The Precautionary Principle

The Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy was published in 2002. The very first recommendation of the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy deals with the Precautionary Principle:

RECOMMENDATION 1: Assess all new or revised policies and programmes for their impact on biodiversity and apply the precautionary principle

The Precautionary Principle has already been applied in respect of the temporary Special Protection Order enacted in January 2004. The Countryside Alliance's claim that this could have a negative impact on hare numbers²⁶ has been proved wrong. A recent study carried out for the Environment and Heritage Service²⁷ showed no evidence of any detrimental impact on hare numbers in Northern Ireland during the period 2002-2004. For most of this period no coursing licences were issued and, as a consequence, no significant amount of coursing took place. It is quite apparent that the Irish hare population in Northern Ireland is no worse off for the absence of coursing activity.

The Special Protection Order (referred to above) was challenged in the High Court by the Dungannon and District Coursing Club, supported by the Countryside Alliance. Prior to the hearing, Ronan Gorman (CEO of the Countryside Alliance) presented a petition of 8,000 signatures expressing opposition to the SPO. Although the Countryside Alliance claimed substantial and widespread support in its opposition to the introduction of the SPO, the number of signatures submitted constituted less than 1% of the adult population of Northern Ireland. The challenge was dismissed and the Court upheld the introduction of the SPO in its totality.

Conclusion

There is insufficient data to accurately assess the exact impact enclosed coursing has on the Irish hare population. However, there is no available evidence to indicate that coursing has any benefit for the species whatsoever. Enclosed coursing may be responsible for significant numbers of hare deaths – up to 48% of hares coursed on some occasions. Deaths due to sub-acute or chronic capture myopathy are likely to go unreported or attributed to ‘natural causes’¹¹

Coursing targets and depletes fragile local populations, and in this context alone, must be viewed as a real threat to the species. It is widely recognised that sustainable breeding rates and leveret survival are important factors for recovery of a sustainable Irish hare population. Coursing poses a threat to breeding females and their offspring and must be addressed as part of a conservation strategy. Effective permanent protection within Wildlife Legislation will serve to underpin a wider conservation strategy and make a significant contribution to the long-term recovery of the Irish hare.

Recommendations

- That the *Precautionary Principle* should be applied in all policy and decision making in respect of the Irish hare.
- That no further licences are issued to permit the capture of hares in Ireland (Both jurisdictions).
- That hares (all species) are given full and effective protection under the relevant wildlife legislation in both jurisdictions of Ireland.
- That Special Protection Orders in respect of hares are implemented until such time that is the subject of full protection within the Wildlife Legislation.
- That Animal Welfare and Wildlife Protection Legislation be proactively and effectively enforced across both jurisdictions in Ireland.

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