

# ***Irish Coursing Club***

Davis Road,  
Clonmel.  
Phone 052 22611  
Fax 052 26446

Chief Executive/Secretary: **D.J. Histon**  
Email [administration@sportingpress.ie](mailto:administration@sportingpress.ie)

## **The Fate of the Irish Hare in Northern Ireland:** *A Brief Proposal to Reconsider Park Coursing*

**February 2010**

### Background

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, several studies on the Irish hare were undertaken in Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (RoI), and several of them by Quercus, Queen's University's ecological research programme at their School for Biological Sciences. Providing "expert advice to Government in the field of Biodiversity and Conservation Sciences directly linked to statutory responsibilities for nature conservation"<sup>1</sup>, they were well qualified to produce reports which were scientifically transparent, credible, reliable, and verifiable.<sup>2</sup> Among the most important and consistently repeated observations made within these documents were:

- 1) the enormous impact the introduction of muzzling had on Irish Hare mortality rates during coursing events;*
- 2) the steadily falling mortality rate of Irish Hare even well after muzzling had been introduced;*
- 3) the coursing-related mortality rate of Irish Hare was negligible in terms of impact on the total estimated Irish Hare population.*

Very recent statistics will further verify the second observation above as well, with the RoI's release statistics for the 2008-2009 coursing year that 97.5% of the Irish Hare

---

<sup>1</sup> From the Quercus website: <http://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/Quercus/>

<sup>2</sup> See Neil Reid, Ciarán Magee, W. Ian Montgomery, "Integrating field sports, hare population management and conservation", *Acta Theriologica* 55 (1): 61-71, 2010; see also Neil Reid, Karina Dingerkus, W. Ian Montgomery, Ferdia Marnell, Rebecca Jeffrey, Deirdre Lynn, Naomi Kingston & Robbie A. McDonald, *Status of hares in Ireland, Hare Survey of Ireland 2006/07*, Irish Wildlife Manual No. 30, Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 1-60; Reid, N., Montgomery, W.I. & McDonald, R.A. (2007) *Temporal trends in the Irish hare population*, Quercus for the Environment and Heritage Service (DOE, N.I.). UK; N. Reid, RA McDonald, WI Montgomery, "Factors associated with hare mortality during coursing", *Animal Welfare* 2007, 16: 427-434.

captured for coursing were returned in a robust state to proliferate in the wider countryside. Even more recently, during the 2010 National Meeting in Clonmel, which was held over 3 days and comprised more than 200 courses, there was not one hare fatality.

In spite of this, in recent years the sport of coursing has been misrepresented and sensationalised through the efforts of several animal rights movements. One of the most significant misrepresentations is that Irish hare populations have suffered due to coursing activity, and this has repeatedly been proven to be an inaccurate assumption. Moreover, the most recently published research observes that

*“...the mean density of hares within Irish Coursing Club preserves (99.9 hares/km<sup>2</sup>) was 18 times greater than mean density throughout the wider countryside (5.6 hares/km<sup>2</sup>).”<sup>3</sup>*

The same report concludes

*“...our results suggest that hare numbers are maintained at high levels on Irish Coursing Club preserves either because clubs select areas of high hare density and subsequently have a negligible impact on hare numbers or actively manage hare populations and have a positive effect on numbers.”<sup>4</sup>*

In view of the enormous work involved in our hare husbandry efforts and the continued decline in hare mortality during coursing, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that hare numbers continue to be found at high levels directly due to such efforts. This is also supported by the above document, as follows:

Tapper and Stoate (1994) suggest that predator control by landowners and gamekeepers is an important factor in helping to maintain local hare populations. Predation by foxes may limit hare numbers principally impacting juvenile recruitment (Lindström *et al.* 1994, Reynolds and Tapper 1995). Vaughan *et al.* (2003) suggested that hares were less abundant on farms where foxes were seen frequently whilst a fox sarcoptic mange epidemic demonstrated that fox removal can increase hare abundance (Lindström *et al.* 1994). It seems likely, therefore, that active fox control by coursing club members and associated landowners may positively affect local hare abundance. In Ireland, where hares are held in captivity for up to 2 months prior to coursing, there may be less obvious benefits of coursing. Periods of captivity, veterinary attention, treatment with anthelmintics and artificial feeding during captivity (Anonymous 2008) may actually improve pre-breeding condition and subsequent reproductive fitness of hares released back into the wild (Murray *et al.* 1998, Dyrce *et al.* 2005, Molony *et al.* 2006). Over winter survival of Scottish mountain hares *Lepus timidus scoticus* can be significantly improved by supplementary feeding, increasing male body mass and allowing females to breed earlier while treatment with Ivermectin (a broad spectrum anti-parasite medication) can significantly improve female fecundity (Newey *et al.* 2007). Moreover

---

<sup>3</sup> Reid, et al, 2010...p.66.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 69.

translocation of animals among subpopulations may increase genetic heterosis and combat the problems associated with habitat fragmentation. Burns *et al.* (2000) suggested that in the absence of hare coursing there may be reduced tolerance by farmers of damage to agricultural crops, less interest in encouraging and sustaining suitable habitats, greater propensity to allow shooting, an increase in illegal coursing and deliberate culling of hares to prevent illegal poaching.<sup>5</sup>

Another misconception advanced by our critics is that hare netted for coursing events are injured during netting and that pregnant and nursing does as well as injured or ill hare are also kept when netted. *This is simply not the case, as such practices are detrimental to the very hare population upon which our sport depends.* The hare which are caught are kept in spacious hare parks where they are looked after by practicing veterinarians who worm and vaccinate them, and where a diet is provided to ensure the hare for coursing meetings are robust and strong.

It must be stressed here that, in spite of the claims of coursing's critics, the aim of organised coursing is not to kill or injure the hare, and it is imperative that ICC coursing per se should not ever be confused with the illegal hunting of hare with groups of unmuzzled dogs. It is in fact the latter which are most likely to be a contributing factor – along with urbanisation and intensive farming - towards the depletion of the Irish hare in the Northern Ireland.

#### Proposal

In view of the overview presented above, the Irish Coursing Club submits the following proposal to the Environment Committee, all of which is further negotiable:

- *the ICC, which has responsibility for coursing in NI, would like a **temporary** reconsideration of the ban on netting hares; duration to be decided;*
- *the netting of hares can be limited to a specific period sufficient to prepare appropriately.*
- *the netting of hares can be further restricted to specified rules or regulations on the hares which are actually caught;*
- *the two current NI coursing clubs must submit a minimum of 3 members to attend the ICC's annual hare husbandry seminar;*
- *the two current NI clubs' hare parks must meet certain space and welfare standards, and be offered for inspection by an agreed-upon source;*

---

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p.67-8.

*-the results of the meetings held by the clubs during this temporary period are directly reportable to the Minister for The Environment, Mr. Edwin Poots.*

*- the two current NI clubs might be temporarily restricted to holding shared meetings;*

*- the mortality results of the meetings held by the clubs during this temporary period are directly reportable to the Minister for the Environment and /or the Environment Committee.*

The ICC remains open to discuss these and any other conditions in order to allow coursing to begin once again in Northern Ireland and make its contribution to the establishment of a healthy and thriving Irish hare population. We stand behind the demonstrated efficacy of our latest hare husbandry efforts, anticipate a continued drop in mortality rates, and are anxious to apply our most recent hare husbandry initiatives to Northern Ireland.

Signed



Chief Executive/Secretary  
Irish Coursing Club