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## **Hares more numerous in Irish Coursing Club Preserves than wider countryside**

Irish hares are eighteen times more abundant in areas managed by the Irish Coursing Club (ICC) than at similar sites in the wider countryside a recent study by Queen's University Belfast has shown.

There are approximately 76 local coursing clubs distributed throughout Ireland and each is associated with a number of discrete localities, known colloquially as 'hare preserves'. These are managed favourably for hares including predator control, prohibition of other forms of hunting such as shooting and poaching and the maintenance and enhancement of suitable hare habitat.

Anti-field sports organisations, in addition to animal welfare objections, dispute the efficacy of ICC hare population management practices claiming that annual harvesting of hares causes local population declines and expiration.

The research team, lead by Dr. Neil Reid, Quercus Centre Manager at Queen's, indirectly tested the efficacy of management practices by comparing hare numbers within preserves to that in the wider countryside.

Dr Reid said: "While we cannot rule out the role of habitat, our results suggest that hare numbers are maintained at high levels in ICC preserves either because clubs select areas of high hare density and subsequently have a negligible effect on numbers, or that active population management positively increases hare abundance."

The research, published in the peer-reviewed international journal *Acta Theriologica*, suggests that field sports such as shooting, hunting and hare coursing promote the multifunctional use of farmland in which wildlife provides a resource for non-agricultural activities supporting sustainable development. Also, field sports may offer financial and recreational incentives to farmers and private landowners who are frequently willing to accept conservation costs over a wider area than Government can afford to subsidize.

Co-author Professor Ian Montgomery, Head of the School of Biological Sciences at Queen's said "The Irish hare is one of the highest priority species in Ireland and its conservation is a fine balance between the management of suitable habitat within agricultural systems, population management by coursing clubs and associated animal welfare concerns. Without legal, well organised and regulated coursing much of the costs of conservation will fall exclusively on Government."

This latest research follows on from a previous study published by the same group in the journal *Animal Welfare* during 2007, which showed that survival of hares at coursing events significantly improved with the introduction of compulsory muzzling of greyhounds in 1993, while improved levels of captive animal husbandry reduced mortality yet further. It is estimated that about four per cent of the 6,000 or so hares netted by the ICC each year are killed with the rest being released back into the wild.

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Further information on the study is available on the Quercus website at [www.quercus.ac.uk](http://www.quercus.ac.uk).

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Notes for editors

1. Dr Neil Reid is available for interview. Please telephone 00 44 (0) 28 90 97 3091 to arrange.

2. Quercus is Northern Ireland's research centre for biodiversity and conservation science and is part of the School of Biological Sciences, Queen's University Belfast.

3. The Irish hare (*Lepus timidus hibernicus*) is listed on Appendix III of the Bern Convention (Anon 1979) and Annex V(a) of the EC Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC), and is listed as an internationally important species in the Irish Red Data Book (Whilde 1993). It is also subject to an Northern Ireland and All-Ireland Species Action it is one of the highest priority species for conservation action in Ireland.

4. Irish hares have undergone a substantial population decline since the early 20th century due to agricultural intensification and loss of suitable habitat.

5. Irish hares have been shown to be associated a habitat matrix of improved farmland providing good quality grassland for grazing at night interspersed with areas of tall vegetation providing cover and shelter for lying-up during the day, for example, patches of rushes.