

Hare hunting and coursing

Over the last century hare numbers have declined dramatically, caused in large part by the advent of intensive methods of agriculture. Brown hares are the subject of a Biodiversity Action Plan aimed at maintaining and expanding their population so that spring numbers double by 2010. Despite this, hares continue to be hunted and killed across the UK by more than one hundred hound packs – beagles, harriers and bassets. Large numbers are also coursed by individual gangs with lurchers or in competitions where the hare is ‘beaten’ (forced) into an arena by groups of people before two dogs are set upon it.

The Committee of Inquiry into Hunting with Dogs in England and Wales, chaired by Lord Burns, heard evidence both for and against these practices and concluded that: *‘there is little or no need to control overall hare numbers’*. Lord Burns also found that: *‘hare hunting and coursing are essentially carried out for recreational purposes’*.

Hare hunting

The hunting season runs from September to March. This means that some hunted females may leave orphaned and dependant young, despite claims from hunt supporters that hares are left undisturbed during the breeding season.

A single hare is chased until the dogs kill it or it escapes. Hunted hares are beaten not by speed but by the stamina of the dogs. The hare is worn down by a protracted chase, which provides greater satisfaction for the followers, until it is simply overwhelmed by the hounds and killed.

Hunted hares are reluctant to leave familiar territory and will run in a large circle until worn down, caught and killed. The Burns Inquiry concluded: *‘this experience seriously compromises the welfare of the hare’*.

Hare coursing

Hare coursing involves the setting of two dogs, usually greyhounds or lurchers, on a single hare. The season for hare coursing lasts from September to March, potentially leaving dependent young to fend for themselves when their mothers are killed. The majority of hares killed by coursing are targeted by individual gangs that operate with lurchers.

Competition coursing is funded largely by gambling and watched by spectators in the coursing arena. The hares are ‘beaten’ onto a field where handlers are holding the dogs. The hare is given a head start before the dogs are released. Unlike hare hunting, the dogs used in coursing are bred for their speed and are therefore able to make up the lead in seconds. The hare must then rely on its ability to turn sharply if it is to avoid being caught by the dogs. The dogs are awarded points by a judge on horseback for their speed and for the skill they show in turning the hare.

Hares have been seen being pulled like a rope in a tug of war between the jaws of the two dogs until the ‘picker up’ – one of the coursing officials – reaches the dogs and removes the hare. At this point the hare may still be alive. After being taken from the dogs’ mouths the hare’s neck is usually broken, although officials have been known to take several attempts to succeed.

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There is considerable evidence to show that hares suffer when coursed. Coursing enthusiasts claim that, when a hare is caught, it dies instantaneously from the bite of one dog. However, post mortem reports have shown that hares can die a gruesome and painful death as they are savaged by the dogs.

Following the 2001 Millennium Cup coursing event, the RSPCA arranged for the carcasses of five of the hares killed during the competition to be examined by an independent vet. The vet concluded, following post mortem, that none had died instantly from a bite. All had suffered injuries before being killed and three of them had had their necks dislocated after being retrieved from the dogs.

The Universities Federation for Animal Welfare carried out fifty-three post mortem examinations on coursed hares¹. None of them had been killed by 'a bite to the neck' and a number had to be killed by the handlers when they were retrieved from the dogs.

Donald Broom, Professor of Animal Welfare at Cambridge University has reviewed the scientific literature relating to the welfare of wild mammals hunted by dogs and concluded: *'It is likely that hare coursing or other hunting with dogs will cause very poor welfare in hares.'*²

The Burns Committee commissioned research into how hares are killed during coursing. It showed that just one of twelve coursed hares was definitely killed by the dogs. Of the remaining eleven, five were killed only when the picker-up arrived and broke their necks, while in six cases the cause of death was uncertain. The committee concluded that: *'It is clear, moreover, that, if the dog or dogs catch the hare, they do not always kill it quickly'*.

The pro-hunting Countryside Alliance recently admitted that hares are trapped before being transported around the country to be hunted in coursing competitions. In April 2000, when asked by Lord Burns during an Oral Session of the Inquiry into Hunting with Dogs whether hares are transported in this way, Charles Banning of the Countryside Alliance replied: *'All our experience indicates to us that where hares are transported – and I would say that it is in a minority of cases; on my count not more than 7 of the 24 greyhound clubs have been involved in transporting hares – that the hares do not, are not coursed until they can show sufficient knowledge of the ground, until they are properly orientated'*.

¹ UFAW Study 1977–1979

² Broom, D.M. *The Welfare of Deer, Foxes, Mink and Hares Subjected to Hunting by Humans*, Cambridge University Information Centre, 2000