

Mystery of the wild ... Britain's foxes are in decline

(while deer population booms)



CALLUM DICKSON/ALAMY/TOBY MELVILLE/REUTERS

Despite the perceived proliferation of urban foxes and the 2004 ban on hunting, the predators' numbers are dwindling, say researchers. Also in decline across Britain are rabbit and mountain hare populations

JASPER COPPING

BRITAIN'S DEER populations are booming, but rabbit, hare and fox numbers are all falling, a study has found.

The research shows that numbers of one species of deer have almost trebled in just under two decades, while others have doubled.

Over the same period, rabbit numbers have dropped by 48 per cent, mountain hares by 43 per cent and fox by 20 per cent.

The figures come from the only study of its kind, which gauges the nationwide fortunes of the most commonly seen wild mammals in Britain. The results show vastly differing fortunes for the nine species across the countryside.

The details, published in the *European Journal of Wildlife Research*, involved annual monitoring of 1,000 square

miles (2,600 square kilometres) over the past 18 years.

Each year volunteers survey the same square kilometre, picked at random from a map, over two days during the spring and early summer, and record every creature they encounter.

The largest increase was among two deer species introduced into the UK from abroad: Reeves's muntjac, with numbers up by 181 per cent, followed by fallow deer, up 89 per cent.

The former were brought from China to Woburn Park in Bedfordshire in the early 20th century. Deliberate releases and escapes from there, as well as elsewhere, lead to feral populations quickly becoming established.

The latter arrived in Britain with the Norman Conquest, although there may have been earlier attempts by the Romans to bring them across

from the continent.

Two native species, red deer and roe deer, also saw large rises, of 71 per cent and 60 per cent respectively. The study avoided known deer parks.

The animals have benefited from a lack of natural predators, a shift away from hunting and trapping, and changes in agriculture and habitat.

In many areas, they are blamed for destroying crops and woodland and reports of the booming populations will increase concerns that they are having a harmful impact on other species and add to calls for more culling.

The biggest fall, in rabbits, coincides with the spread of a fatal condition, rabbit haemorrhagic disease, of which the first recorded cases in the wild occurred the year before the period covered by the most recent research.

The virus has been described as the biggest threat to

the species since the major myxomatosis outbreak of the Fifties.

The researchers also suggest that predators, such as buzzards, could be a factor in the declining numbers.

Perhaps the study's most surprising finding has been the fall in Britain's fox population. The research covers the

advent of the Hunting Act in 2004, which banned the hunting of foxes with more than two dogs, and also a period of increasing reports of foxes living in urban areas.

The research does appear to indicate that the steepest decline was between 1995 and 2004, since when the population has been relatively stable.



There are growing concerns over the thriving deer population

The researchers conclude that they found "no evidence that fox numbers have increased since the ban" and suggest "the fox population trajectory is now more stable following the ban". They also point out that although the study does cover urban areas, it is predominantly rural.

Grey squirrel numbers are continuing to rise, by 8 per cent. A significant increase in the population's numbers in north-west England (15 per cent) may be of concern because of their potential impact on the native red squirrel, which is now largely confined to Scotland.

The most stable population has been that of the brown hare, up just 1 per cent, although there were marked regional differences, with a 50 per cent fall in north-west England but an increase of 70 per cent in the east Midlands. The mountain variety, howev-

er, which is confined to upland areas, has been in sharp decline, due to habitat loss and changing land use.

The survey was initially established to monitor bird populations and is still run by the British Trust for Ornithology.

The two other species of deer, sika and Chinese water deer, were also observed but not in large enough numbers to be covered by the research.

Because their numbers are harder to monitor, badgers were also not included, although their setts were counted. The statistics are yet to be analysed.

Dr Lucy Wright, from the trust, said: "There is no other widespread scheme to monitor these species across the UK."

"It shows the situation across the country as a whole. What is needed now is more research into what is behind these trends."

Mushroom thieves reap the benefits of a bumper harvest

CLAIRE CARTER

THIEVES ARE stripping fields of mushrooms and selling them on to restaurants for high prices, it was claimed yesterday.

Surrey Wildlife Trust warned of "unprecedented" numbers of people collecting mushrooms from its sites.

It said that mushrooms were being taken from sites of special scientific interest, which are protected by law. Collecting the fungi for commercial gain is theft, and therefore illegal.

However, foragers are thought to be tempted by restaurants willing to pay for mushrooms, with prices estimated to be more than £25 per pound.

Experts have warned against people stripping fields, as some of the most deadly fungi look similar to edible mushrooms.

They also warn that excessive foraging for wild fungi can have a devastating impact on wildlife, as they help break down dead wood, as well as providing food for small mammals and insects.

Andrew Jamieson, from Surrey Wildlife Trust, said: "We are keen that visitors come to our sites to admire the many fascinating shapes, forms and colours the fungi world has to offer, but please leave them there for the next visitor and future generations to enjoy."

The trust said signs had been put up in different languages at various sites to try to stop people stealing mushrooms.

In the New Forest there have been claims that organised groups of Eastern Europeans have been foraging on a large scale.

This year's harvest has been one of the best in living memory, according to conservation groups, thanks to perfect growing conditions of a damp spring and long, warm summer.