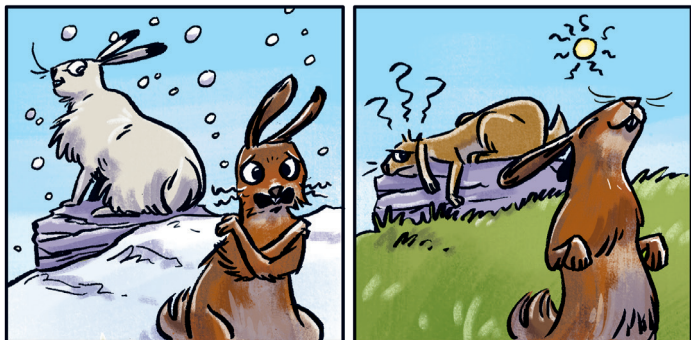


> A relic from the ice age on borrowed time

The development of tourist activities in winter, the irregular snow conditions, the change in farming practices and summer tourism are all threats to the mountain hare. **The future of this cold-climate species is very uncertain.** Its distribution is slowly declining at the lower edge of its distribution zone.

At the same time, European hares are following the opposite dynamic. The general rise in temperatures is encouraging them to venture higher into the mountains. They are therefore penetrating the mountain hare's environment where they are competing with them.

Mountain hares also have to be wary of royal eagles and foxes who are their main predators.



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Expert opinion

- 1/ **TRUE.** It is a member of my family, the Leporidae
- 2/ **FALSE.** Although I was around when there were mammoths, I never came across a dinosaur
- 3/ **TRUE.** The males weigh 2.4 kg on average, compared to 2.7 kg for the females
- 4/ **FALSE.** I am not a rabbit, I'm happy to hide in a shelter

The mountain hare



Distinctives features

Family: Leporidae
Size: 52 to 60 cm
Lifetime: 6 to 8 years
Gestation : 50 days
Litter : up to 2 (2 to 4 leverets per litter)

- ✓ Change of colour / season
- ✓ Snowshoe-like feet
- ✓ Can eat their own droppings

At the start

> A small hare that dates back to the ice ages

Evolving on the edges of the glaciers, the mountain hare, also known as the “whitecoat”, appeared during the last glacial cycles (15000 to 11700 years ago)

and was a contemporary of the mammoth and the woolly rhinoceros.

Its small size was doubtless what allowed it to adapt to the changes in its environment.

To withstand the major global warming that followed these great ice ages, it sought refuge in the Alps where it found the ideal conditions for thriving.



Habitat

> The ghost of the high mountains

Mountain hares only live in the Alps.

They live between altitudes of 1500 m to 3000 m. In the highest areas, they frequent the same habitats as the rock ptarmigan, above the tree line. Their territory consists mainly of Alpine grasslands

with sparse vegetation and rocky outcrops.

These rugged landscapes dotted with large boulders provide them with safe shelter during the day.

In the lower altitudes of their living range, they readily frequent coniferous forests. They show a clear preference for north-facing slopes, also known as “ubac”.



Daily life

> My outfit changes with the season

A nocturnal animal, it spends its days in a shallow depression in the ground where it counts on its “camouflage” and its stillness to escape being seen by its predators and hikers.

To blend in perfectly with the landscape, its coat changes colour according to the season.

> An opportunistic gourmet

Mountain hares like to select their food when they can.

In summer, they particularly enjoy grasses and legumes, while in winter they prefer willows and rose bushes, which they can

cut with their powerful incisors.

However, when conditions become extreme, they can also make do with dry grasses and small shrubs.

They can even ingest their own droppings to get the most out of meagre food supplies, a process known as cecotrophy.



> A life adapted to the mountains

To limit heat loss, it has smaller ears and a rounder body than its cousin, the European hare. The air-filled hairs of its winter coat provide excellent insulation. Its hind legs are very hairy. It can spread its toes, so they act like snowshoes, making it easier to get around in deep snow.

The female reproduces from March onwards. Her young are born covered in hair and with their eyes open. They grow very quickly.

True or false? Answers: on the last page

- 1/ The European rabbit is my cousin.
- 2/ I was around when there were dinosaurs.
- 3/ The male is smaller than the female.
- 4/ I dig a burrow to hide in.