

The ecology of European hares (*Lepus europaeus*) in forests – a pilot study in the Palatinate Forest, southwest Germany

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The preferred habitats of the European hare are open, mostly arable landscapes where hares can reach densities of at least 30 individuals per 100 ha. Hares can also live in closed and large forests with no access to field areas in presumably 10–100 times lower densities. Nevertheless, these obviously unfavourable habitats might host a substantial subpopulation. In terms of loss of biodiversity and population decline in hares in many parts of Europe a better understanding of the ecology of these forest-dwelling hares would be very useful.

In March 2011 we started a pilot study about the habitat use of the European hare in the Palatinate Forest in Rhineland-Palatinate. With approximately 1,771 km² it is one of the large continuous forests in Europe and, since 1998, it belongs to the transboundary biosphere reserve Palatinate Forest-Vosges du Nord. Based on spot light counts the estimated population density of European hares is at least 0.6 individuals per 100 ha. Taking only the clearings into account the estimated density increases to 12 individuals per 100 ha. Based on this pilot study, we plan to trap and radio track several hares. Currently, we try to find a suitable capture method – a more difficult task than previously thought.