

Mad March Hares



The phrase 'as mad as a March hare' was popularised by Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland but is an old saying referring to the species behaviour during the breeding season, which peaks in March and April. At this time the females will test the strength of their suitors by forcing them to chase her in circles around open fields.

If a male catches her before she is ready she will rise up on her hind legs and strike him with her front paws - known as 'boxing'. Males will sometimes also fight in this way.

There are two species of hare in Scotland but only the brown (also known as European or common) hare *Lepus europaeus* is found in the lowlands. They are not native, they were brought here by the Romans, probably as a food source. As late as the 19th century they were still rare in Scotland and being introduced for food and 'sport' in some areas

The name 'hare' comes from an old English word for 'grey'. The Scots name is 'mawkins' or 'bawdy' and the Gaelic is 'maigheach' or 'geàrr'.

Hares do not burrow, they lay up during the day in 'forms' which are shallow ditches scraped into earth, they'll often use ploughed fields or pathside ditches for this and their camouflage, along with their ability to lie perfectly still, makes them almost invisible when they do.

In Scotland it was widely believed that turning into a hare was the preferred disguise for witches and they were persecuted because of this. Coming across a hare on your travels was considered terribly unlucky. Harebells were supposed to be a vital ingredient in the spells used to turn witch into hares. Hares are still persecuted by criminals who hunt them with dogs for 'sport'. This is cruel and illegal but still goes on in many areas.



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Rabbits are closely related to hares, there is one species in the UK called *Oryctolagus cuniculus* (meaning the underground digging hare!) This refers to their habit of living in burrows called warrens. In Scots rabbits are called 'conies', 'maps' or 'lugs', in Gaelic they are 'coinean'.

Rabbits are also not native to the UK, they were brought here after the Norman invasion of 1066. They didn't reach some parts of the Highlands of Scotland until the late 19th century where they were quickly considered a pest. Even today their grazing habits, added to that of sheep and deer, prevent the regeneration of natural woodlands.

In other areas some towns maintained rabbit warrens as a food source, even appointing people to guard and manage them. At first they were considered a food reserved only for Lords and Ladies, but by the end of the 19th century some farmworkers even had their wages paid in rabbits!

It can be difficult to tell hares and rabbits apart, even the great artist Edwin Landseer (probably most famous for his stag painting 'Monarch of the Glen') faced this issue when he painted a hare - one critic dismissed it as poor work declaring '*We never saw a rabbit so large*'.

Hares are larger than rabbits and more likely to be seen on their own. They have much larger feet and ears – the ears also tend to have black tips.

This confusion is found all through folklore and old stories where hares and rabbits are treated pretty much interchangeably. Even the most famous rabbit in the world – the Easter Bunny – was probably originally a hare. An old folk belief was that hares were hermaphrodites or could change sex at will and they became a symbol of fecundity and the return of spring.



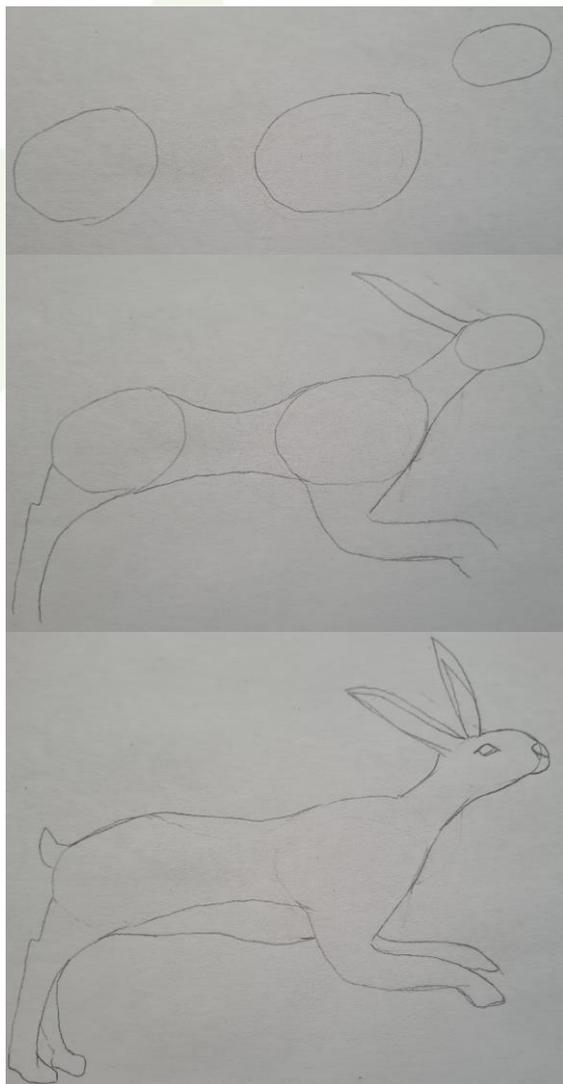
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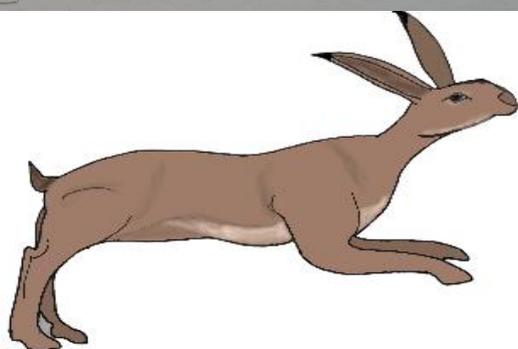
Draw a Hare



Art can be really therapeutic – and you don't have to be a brilliant artist to have a go at drawing! Why not try this simple hare. All you need to do to start is draw three circles with a pencil.

Now draw some curved lines to join the circles together. Add some more curved lines to show where the legs will go. Don't forget to add a long ear!

Next start to add some details like an eye, the nose and tail. Draw in the second ear and the shape of the feet. You can start to rub out some of the lines you don't need anymore



You're almost done... Rub out the rest of the lines you don't need and go over the others in pen. We've chosen to draw a Brown Hare so we've shaded the body in with brown and cream – you could make a mountain hare if you prefer! Don't forget the black tips to the ears.

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The Three Hares



The three hares are a famous circular design that appeared all over the ancient world, from China to the UK no-one really knows where it started or when, or how it spread, but every one was doing them – maybe they were like an early internet meme!

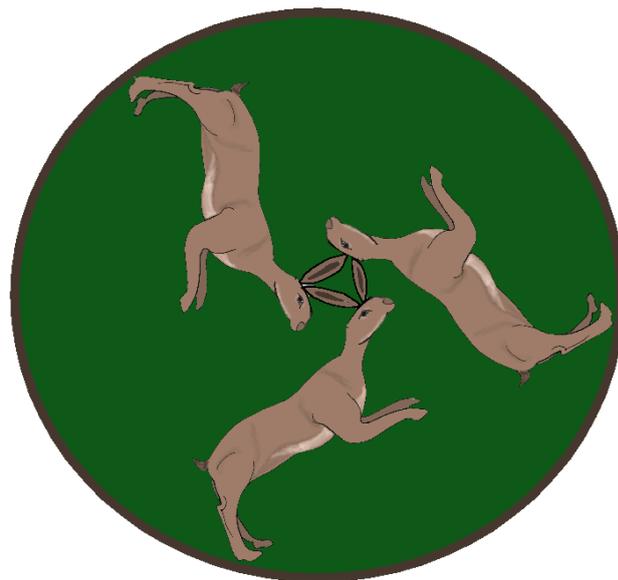
The designs usually feature three hares chasing each other in a circle, each sharing an ear with its neighbour.

The idea of rotational symmetry seems to have fascinated our ancestors and can be seen in lots of old designs – triskelions (like in the flag of the Isle of Man) are one example as are the Celtic leaf shaped symbols called triquetras.

These symbols were often linked with nature and protection. The meaning of the three hares seems to have been so obvious to our ancestors that no one ever bothered to write it down so all modern interpretations are really just guesswork. Many people believe it is related to the lunar cycle, fertility, or possibly rebirth. Christian traditions often link it to the idea of the trinity.

It may have originated in China or in Buddhist symbology but is also used in Islamic, Judaic and Christian tradition. It might have been a puzzle or riddle — “Three hares sharing three ears, Yet every one of them has two “. It might also have been used as an early form of an optical illusion.

Why not trying turning your hare drawing into three? What does your design represent to you?



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