

Conservation news

Unnoticed, the Hainan hare is disappearing



The Hainan hare *Lepus hainanus* is endemic to Hainan Island, China. It was formerly widely distributed in hilly and lowland areas but has declined and become extirpated in some locations. The total population may not exceed 250–500. It is categorized as Endangered on the IUCN Red List and as Critically Endangered on the Red List of Vertebrates in China.

In surveys in August 2023 and January 2024, supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (grant no. 32270480), we observed only one live Hainan hare and a few footprints, and did not find any fresh Hainan hare faeces. Our survey covered Danzhou, Changjiang, Dongfang and Ledong in the western part of Hainan Island, areas where the hare was formerly most common. Seemingly unnoticed, the Hainan hare is disappearing.

The major threats to the Hainan hare are habitat loss and hunting. More than 90% of its habitat has been lost as a result of conversion for agriculture. Although the hare is listed as Class II on the National Key Protected Species List in China, illegal hunting was once common and may still occur. The habitat of the hare is not being effectively protected, and the few remaining populations depend on nature reserves established for the Endangered

Eld's deer *Rucervus eldii*. There has been limited research on the Hainan hare and its status as a species remains uncertain. Although research suggests that the Hainan hare may be the same species as the Burmese hare *Lepus peguensis* (Kong et al., 2014, *Mitochondrial DNA Part A*, 27, 265–269), the island location of the Hainan hare suggests a unique evolutionary history.

Although the establishment of the National Park of Hainan Tropical Rainforest in 2021 is conducive to better protection of local wildlife and plants, the status of the Hainan hare is of concern. Measures need to be taken to prevent the extinction of this species, including a comprehensive survey to assess the species and the status of its habitat, strict law enforcement to eliminate any illegal hunting, enhanced publicity to raise residents' awareness of the species' status, and improvement and management of the species' habitat.

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