DISCOVERING RABBITS IN THE BRECKS

◆ You can see rabbits almost anywhere in the Brecks, but there are sizeable wild warrens at Grimes Graves, and Cavenham, East Wretham and Weeting Heaths. Late afternoons and evenings are the best time to watch them; take your binoculars. You may be lucky to see their old enemy the stoat at work.

◆ To find out more about warrening, visit Ancient House Museum, Thetford (Tel. 01842-752 599), Brandon Heritage Centre (Tel. 01842-813 707) and Mildenhall Museum (Tel. 01638-716 970).

© Chris Knights

◆ To see warren banks go to High Lodge Visitor Centre and walk the 'Blue' or 'Yellow' trails. For further details Tel. 01842-810 271 or 815 434.

◆ A circular warren earthwork can be seen in Knettishall Heath Country Park. For further details Tel. 01953-688 265.

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Thetford Warren Lodge today

◆ Visit the ruins of Thetford Warren Lodge (off the B1107, Thetford to Brandon road), or the smaller Mildenhall Warren Lodge (in Mildenhall Woods, north of a link road between the A1065 and the A11).

BOOKS ABOUT RABBITS

◆ 'The Rabbit'; M. Leach (Shire Natural History No. 39, Princes Risborough, 1989)

◆ 'The Private Life of the Rabbit'; R.M. Lockley (Readers Union, Newton Abbot, 1976)

◆ 'Rabbits and their History'; J. Sheail (David & Charles, Newton Abbot, 1971)

◆ 'Rabbits and Hares'; A. McBride (Whittet Books, London, 1998)

ABOUT THE BRECKS

The Brecks is 370 square miles/940km² of countryside in Norfolk and Suffolk

The Brecks is one of the great natural areas of Britain. It is a place of strange beauty and hidden stories which go back to the Stone Age.

Ancient heathland once covered huge areas of the Brecks, created by the axes of prehistoric farmers and the nibbling teeth of sheep and rabbits. 'Brecks' were temporary fields cultivated for a few years and then allowed to revert to heath once the soil became exhausted. Sand storms were once a regular occurrence, such as the one which engulfed the village of Santon Downham in 1668. Through many centuries the heaths, and the mysterious, fluctuating Breckland lakes known as meres, became home to a distinctive range of plants and animals.

Over the last hundred years the ancient character of the Brecks has been changed forever. The large-scale pine plantations of Thetford Forest and the use of modern farming technology have transformed much of it into more productive land. The remaining stretches, and the more open parts of the forest, are now vital areas for wildlife conservation. The Brecks is an ideal area for quiet recreation, and the forests now welcome over 1½ million visitors each year.

DISCOVERING THE BRECKS

Find out more about the natural and cultural heritage of The Brecks with publications by the Brecks Countryside Project:

- 'Wild Brecks', a nature conservation booklet.
- 'Historic Brecks', a landscape booklet.
- 'The Brecksfile': a multimedia resource file for schools (KS 2)
- Leaflet packs
  - 'Riding', 'Cycling', and 'Walking in the Brecks'
- Brecks topic leaflets:
  - 'Getting to know the Brecks' • 'Wild Places in the Brecks'
  - 'Historic Places in the Brecks' • 'Birds of the Brecks'
  - 'Flint axe to Gunflint'

For more information, contact Tourist Information centres at Brandon, Bury St Edmunds, Newmarket, Swaffham and Watton; visit Ancient House Museum, Thetford; or visit the Brecks website www.brecks.org .

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WARRENING
THE STORY OF RABBITS IN THE BRECKS

The Brecks

INTRODUCTION

© David Mason

Rabbits seem always to have been a part of the countryside, but they were introduced by the Normans in the twelfth century, and had to be carefully nurtured in special enclosures called warrens. The word 'warren' comes from the French word 'garenne'. The Medieval word for a rabbit was 'coney'; only the young ones were called 'rabbits'. An alternative for 'warren' was 'conigar', and derivatives of these names appear as place-names on maps of the area.

© David Mason

NATURAL HISTORY

'To understand the ways of wild rabbits'

Rabbits are social animals, which makes them an ideal choice for communal living in a warren. Dominant bucks control a colony and protect their chosen adult females in the best part of the burrow system. Rabbits sleep on the bare soil of their burrows, but the pregnant does make nests, using fur from their own breasts, leaves, grass and bracken fronds, before giving birth in short tunnels which they dig themselves.

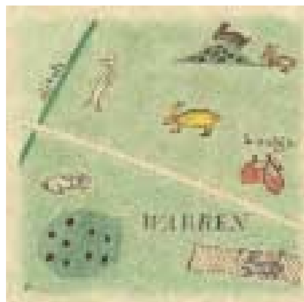
Females can breed five or six times a year, gestation time being only one month, and the young are independent after about six weeks. If the females are under stress, perhaps because of bad weather or lack of food, they can re-absorb their embryos into their bodies rather than produce young which would then die.

Rabbits eat grass and herbage, feeding principally at night, probably to try to avoid their natural predators which include weasels, stoats, hawks, crows, buzzards, tawny owls, rats, polecats, dogs and cats.

WARRENS

'Of very barren soil nevertheless very good for brede of coneys.'

The largest concentration of warrens in Britain was in the Brecks, where the dry, sandy soil was easy for making burrows; the low rainfall and warm summers were most like the climate of the rabbit's Mediterranean homeland, and since Breckland soils were not naturally fertile there was no competition with land for crop-growing. In fact, rabbit farming gave an economic return on land which would otherwise have yielded very little.


Part of Methwold Warren, 1699

The first warrens in the Brecks were established by the abbeys of Ely and Bury St Edmunds. Lakenheath Warren was set up by the Prior of Ely in 1251; Brandon by the Bishop of Ely in 1252 and Mildenhall by the Abbot of Bury in 1328. After the Dissolution of the Monasteries the warrens were sold to lay landowners. By the eighteenth century there were a dozen warrens next to one another for mile after mile. Their names can still be seen on the Ordnance Survey maps, and include Eriswell, Santon, Thetford and Beachamwell.

The warrener was one of the highest paid manorial officials, reflecting the value placed on the skilled management of the warren.

Rabbits in a new warren could take up to a year to adapt; warreners even had to bore holes to make burrows, otherwise the rabbits would just sit on the surface. The rabbits could be encouraged with extra food. Some warreners planted sow thistles, dandelions and groundsel; Thetford Warren had eighty acres of turnips as winter feed. When it snowed, the warreners spread gorse and tree boughs as shelter and fodder for the rabbits.

Mediaeval ladies ferreting

There is no documentary evidence for the construction of warren banks until the early seventeenth century, so mediaeval warrens were probably bounded by a ditch if at all. When the numbers of rabbits increased and they began to escape onto crops and because there were disputes over boundaries, warren banks were constructed. Grass sods were the cheapest material, with a bank being made two sods wide and about six feet high, capped with gorse, blackthorn or reeds. The perimeter bank of Thetford Warren was eight miles long, and that of Lakenheath ten miles.These banks can still be seen at Wangford, Elveden, Downham High Lodge, Lakenheath and Mildenhall, where there is a record of the rabbits 'breaking through the feeble banks that separated the warren from the neighbouring sheepwalks'.

WARREN LODGES

'As melancholy as a lodge in a warren' - Shakespeare

The warrener and his family lived on the highest part of the warren, in a well-protected building called a lodge. The flint walls were about a metre thick and the windows small and iron-barred. On the ground floor were stored the nets, traps and lanterns, and there were racks on which to dry the skins and hang the salted meat.

View of Thetford Warren, with distant Lodge, 1866

On the first floor was the living accommodation with a fireplace, a gardrobe and a turret for looking out over the warren.

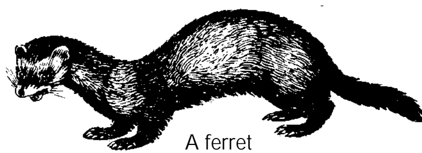
On Brandon Manor in 1382, a contract was made 'through John Berle, with two stone masons, for - one new lodge in the warren, 14 feet long and 12 feet wide - from a firm foundation.'

The ruins of Thetford Warren Lodge and Mildenhall Warren Lodge survive as evocative examples of warren lodges, partly because both had out-buildings attached to them in the nineteenth century and were used as dwellings.

TRAPPING

'Bye, baby bunting, Daddy's gone a-hunting; gone to get a rabbit skin, to wrap a baby bunting in.'

'From February to September the rabbits follow the command to increase and multiply and replenish the earth; from September to February the farmer, his sons, and warreners, take toll of the great community which lives in underground dwellings. Day after day nets are out, and ferrets and lurchers are at work…' WG Clarke ('In Breckland Wilds', 1925).


A ferret

The ferrets were released into specific burrows to drive the rabbits to the surface and into nets, either purse nets over individual holes or large nets over an entire area. The lurchers were on hand to hunt down escapees, being a speedy cross-breed between sheepdog and greyhound. Rabbits could also be caught in a 'tip-trap' or 'tipe'. These were pits, lined with flints to prevent burrowing, with an iron swivelling cover over the top, covered with hay. When the rabbits were used to feeding on this, the warrener would set the cover so that the weight of the rabbits would make it tip and dump them into the pit. In this way, as many as two thousand rabbits could be caught in a single night on Thetford Warren. We now use 'pitfall' to mean 'hidden danger', which was just what these traps were to the rabbits.

Warreners and lurchers at work, c. 1900

© Ancient House Museum, Thetford

POACHING

'I poach — It is better to be hanged than to starve.'

Poaching rabbits at night on an isolated warren was relatively easy. By the fifteenth century organised poaching was rife, because of a rise in demand for rabbits and a growing defiance of manorial authority and privilege. It was evidently a competitive business. In 1444, a gang from Thetford went to Santon Downham Warren, equipped with soldiers' tunics, steel helmets, bows and arrows, cudgels and staffs. They attacked and wounded three members of a rival gang from Elveden.

Punishments for poaching were severe: solitary confinement, hard labour, whipping, and transportation. In 1843, Robert Plum, aged 22, and Rush Lingwood, aged 18, stole one rabbit from a trap in Hockwold Warren; the first was transported to Australia for seven years and the second spent two years in prison.

RABBIT MEAT

'Firm, wholesome, temperate and most laudable.'

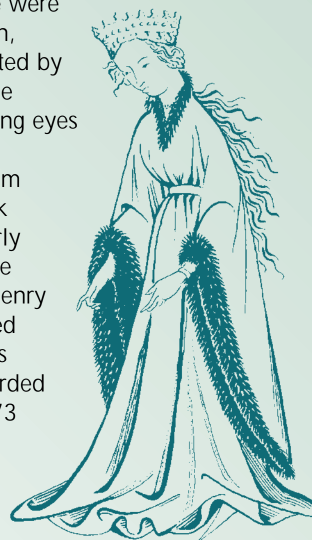
Rabbit meat could be roasted, boiled, fricasséed or made into pies . The does' meat was more tender so they were a penny or two dearer than the bucks. Rabbits were eaten at great feasts: at the installation of the Archbishop of York in 1465, four thousand rabbits were part of the menu. King Charles the Second feasted on rabbits from Methwold Warren, and liked them so much that he granted Methwold a charter for a market.

As early as the 1370's London poulters had contracts with the warreners. In the 1820's, two hundred dozen were sent each day, strung by their legs onto poles and put into carts for the journey. Rabbits were also sold at local markets. In the 1750's they were taken to Newmarket in twelve dozen lots, three or four times a week.

TREATMENT OF SKINS

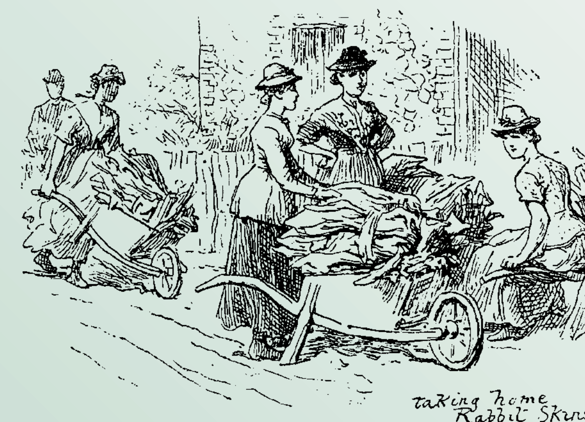
'We have very few furs of our own, except we call rabbit-skins by that name'.

Rabbit fur is usually grey in colour, but a number of different types were farmed in the Brecks. Thetford Warren specialised in valuable silver-greys. In 1834 John Drew Salmon wrote in his diary: *"Afternoon walk'd across the Warren to see Mr Gardiner's new stock of rabbits; they came from Lincolnshire, and are of a silver blue colour. The fur is consider'd of more value than ye common grey"*. There were also white ones on the Warren, indeed it was said to be haunted by a spectre known as 'The White Rabbit' which had huge burning eyes and could never be caught. Blackrabbit Warren in Wretham specialised in producing black rabbits, which were particularly sought after in the later Middle Ages and Tudor times. King Henry VII had nightclothes were lined with this fur, while Sir Thomas Kytson of Hengrave Hall recorded in his Household Book of 1573 the purchase of 'Six Black Coney skins to fur my Mrs Night gown'.There was also a long-haired variety, probably an Angora strain, known as a Shrog.



Once the skins had been separated from the carcasses, they were scraped to remove the fat and soaked in water. They were stretched on stakes to dry and then coated with a tanning agent. They were trodden in a solution of oil, butter, grease or alum, dried again and then chalk was beaten into the skin to absorb the grease and make the fur more lustrous.

Loose hair, stuck together with shellac, made felt for hats. Mercuric nitrate was used to treat the felt, and so many hatters suffered from mercury poisoning, the symptoms of which are similar to madness, which is why we have the phrase 'as mad as a hatter.'



Women outworkers, Brandon, 1887

In the nineteenth century, waste skins were shredded for gelatine and glue, and the ears, feet and tails sent to Kent as manure for the hop-fields.

There were two skin-processing factories in Brandon, Rought and Rought and Lingwoods, employing one hundred and fifty and seventy workers respectively on-site. Women outworkers queued up on Friday evenings to receive skins to work on during the following week. Some of the processed skins were exported to South America.

EROSION

'The Sands are carried about almost as Tides carry water.'

Erosion became a problem even in the fifteenth century as the vegetation was stripped by the rabbits. At Freckenham in 1549, all the rabbits were destroyed by angry villagers after a sandstorm. On Lakenheath Warren in the 1660's, sand dunes spread over a thousand acres and, in the next four years, were blown as far as Santon Downham and even blocked part of the Little Ouse river.

DECLINE

'A large portion of this arid country is full of rabbits, of which the numbers astonished me.'

After so many centuries of use the warrens were 'rabbit-sick', over-grazed and diseased. The Ground Game Act of 1880 meant that all farmers could legally kill rabbits on their own land, so warreners lost their monopoly of supply. They faced competition from Belgian and French imports of meat and skins, and land which once could only support rabbits could now be improved by new farming techniques and produce crops. Some warrens remained as 'Game Warrens' where the rabbits were shot for sport. In the 1920's, half of the Elveden Estate was given over to rabbits, with thirty warreners on the staff; in 1921 128,000 rabbits were killed there.

Thetford Forest was planted in the Brecks from the 1920's onwards. Rabbits were such a nuisance in the new plantations that the Forestry Commission employed thirty warreners to control them. In 1947, 80,000 were trapped in one month on 6,000 acres / 2428 ha. A few years later the disease myxomatosis was introduced as a way of controlling their numbers, and 90% of them died in the Brecks. Their numbers have since recovered, though the disease is still endemic to the area.

Warreners on Elveden Estate, c. 1910
© Ancient House Museum, Thetford

RABBITS TODAY

Over the centuries the teeth and digging power of millions of rabbits have helped to shape the vegetation and topography of the Brecks landscape. Early last century WG Clarke could write: *'Where the rabbit really holds sway on the western slope of a long valley not far from the Little Ouse, hardly a blade of grass will grow. He has tunnelled the slope from top to bottom and kicked out the sand with his powerful hind legs. Winds and the law of gravitation do the rest, and the result is a miniature sahara.'* ('In Breckland Wilds', 1925). However the population crash which followed myxomatosis disease in the 1950's had an immediate effect on the vegetation. Open heathland began to give way to pine and birch scrub. Conservationists now value rabbits for the vital role they play in helping to maintain the short turf and disturbed ground needed by specialised Brecks wildlife. Their work can be seen especially well at Grimes Graves and the nature reserves at Cavenham, East Wretham and Weeting Heaths.

Ground disturbed by rabbits at Weeting Heath National Nature Reserve
© Bev Nichols

Warreners on Elveden Estate, c.1925, equipped with smocks, lurchers, long-handled spades and ferret boxes. The open expanse of Lakenheath Warren can be seen in the background.

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