

DISTRIBUTION OF APENNINE HARE (*LEPUS CORSICANUS*) IN LATIUM, CENTRAL ITALY: COMPARISON/VALIDATION WITH A PROPOSED MODEL OF HABITAT SUITABILITY, AND WITH AN EUROPEAN HARE (*LEPUS EUROPAEUS*) MODEL

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The Apennine hare (*Lepus corsicanus*) is an Italian endemic species widespread in Central and Southern Apennine, and in Sicily. Although this species is often confused with the European hare (*Lepus europaeus*) and it is in way to extinction, it is still present in Latium region (Central Italy), probably with small populations, often both geographically and ecologically isolated.

Starting from 1981-1982 one of the authors (FMA) collected information on this species (firstly considered as an Italian subspecies of *L. europaeus*), more organically from 1990. From this date till today, information of captured specimens during hunting season or killed accidentally, were recorded. Every record was reported on a geographic map using a GIS software (ArcView 3.2). Moreover, always using the same software, and independently, we have constructed a habitat suitability model for this species, and this one was compared with an already proposed model of habitat suitability made by University of Rome "La Sapienza". This latter model is used by the Regional Park Agency (ARP) of Latium (2004). Some differences concerning habitat suitability can be noticed comparing the two models. In fact, our proposed model seems more likely, considering all records collected till now.

Analysing the distribution of Apennine hare in Latium, it seems clearly a taxon adaptable to different habitat and altitudes. In fact it was found from the sea level, in Mediterranean environment, until at the Apennine pastures (the highest record was at 1,700 m a.s.l.). A right model of habitat suitability must be taken with serious consideration for future conservation and/or restocking projects of this species.

Moreover, the habitat suitability model of *Lepus corsicanus* proposed in this study was critically compared with a similar proposed model, in the same region, concerning the European hare *Lepus europaeus*. This latter species is continuously restocked in Latium for hunting purpose even if it is not certain to be autochthonous in Central Italy.