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Switzerland's unhappy bunnies

In the Chinese zodiac, 2023 is the year of the rabbit (or hare). Chocolate bunnies are well-loved in Switzerland, but their natural counterparts in the wild are anything but happy bunnies.

MARC LETTAU

Easter is over for another year. Once again, chocolate bunnies of all shapes and sizes were a hit on the shelves. Swiss supermarket giant Migros produced 6.8 million of them alone at its Delica factory in Buchs (canton of St Gallen).

Country of the hare

China may have its year of the hare (known as 'year of the rabbit' in English), but Switzerland is – or used to be – the country of the hare. In German-speaking Switzerland in particular, countless addresses are named after our long-eared friends. Hasenacker, Hasenberg, Hasenbühl, Hasenburg, Hasenfeld, Hasengaden, Hasenhalden, Hasenmoos, Hasenplatte, Hasensprung, Hasental, Hasenstrick, and Hasenwinkel, to name but a few. Hares in Switzerland – specifically brown hares – used to hop around all over the place – and were hunted in droves.

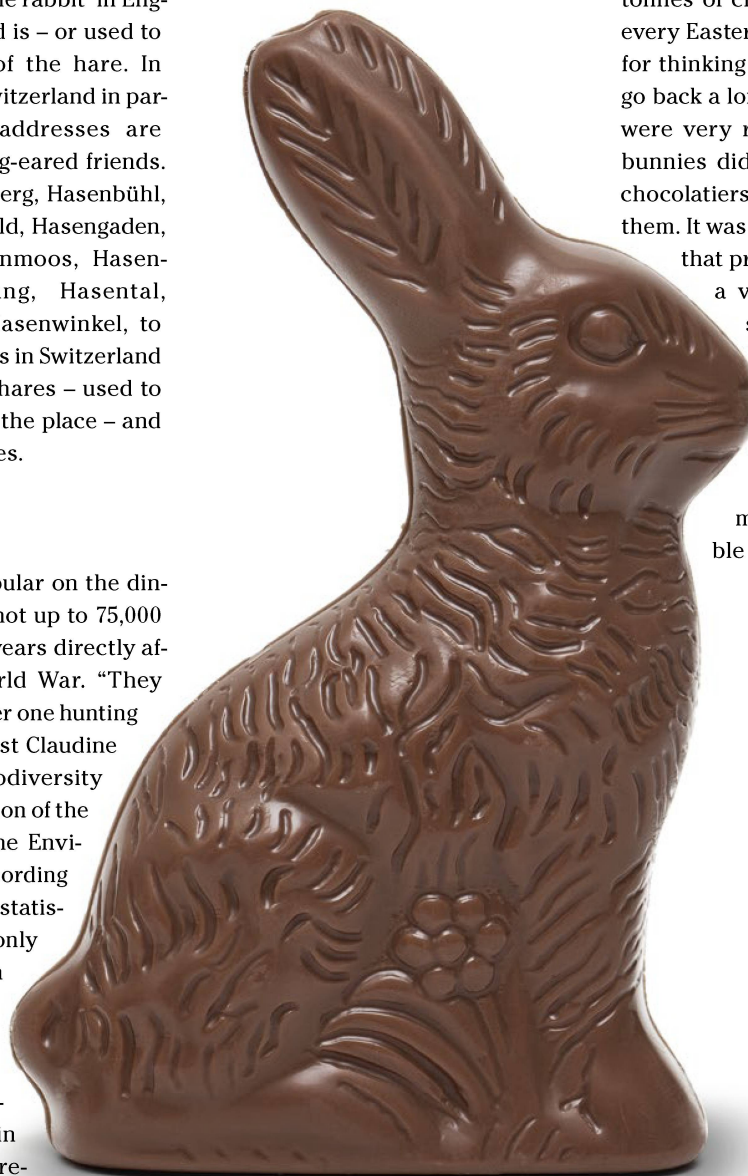
Decline

Hare used to be popular on the dinner plate. Hunters shot up to 75,000 brown hares in the years directly after the Second World War. "They used to be the number one hunting trophy," says biologist Claudine Winter from the Biodiversity and Landscape Division of the Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN). According to the latest hunting statistics for Switzerland, only around 1,500 brown hares are now shot each year. This is because hare numbers have plummeted – especially in the Central Plateau re-

gion. The Swiss brown hare monitoring survey, conducted since 1991 and covering selected areas of the country, illustrates how dramatic the situation has become. It is an exclusively downward trend, with the number of brown hares having halved again in the last three decades from an already low level to a very low level. Switzerland is currently home to an average of 2.5 brown hares per square

kilometre. On the other hand, the rise of the Easter bunny shows no sign of abating. On top of the millions of chocolate bunnies produced by Migros, rival Coop and all the other confectionery manufacturers produce millions more.

According to the Association of Swiss Chocolate Manufacturers, Chocosuisse, around 16 million leave the conveyor belt every year in Switzerland – two per capita – and 5,000 tonnes of chocolate are consumed every Easter. You would be forgiven for thinking that chocolate bunnies go back a long way, but these treats were very rare until 1950. Hollow bunnies did not even exist – until chocolatiers invented and perfected them. It was only about 50 years ago that production kicked in with a vengeance – starting a steep upward trend inversely proportional to the dwindling numbers of brown hares in the wild. Admittedly, the brown hare monitoring survey is unable to provide accurate in-



Most people in Switzerland rarely ever see brown hares. Chocolate bunnies are much more common, to put it mildly. Photo iStock



Higher, farther, faster, more beautiful? In search of somewhat unconventional Swiss records

This edition:

The brown hare and the chocolate bunny – a tale of extremes

formation on the number of brown hares left in Switzerland because of its focus on selected areas of the country. Even the latest hunting statistics are of limited value; hare hunting is illegal in numerous cantons, because the animal is on the red list of endangered species. But there is still one relatively reliable if gruesome statistic documenting the sustained decline of the brown hare: the number of wild animals hit and killed by cars and agricultural machinery. Hares accounted for around 4,000 such deaths in the 1980s. Nowadays, the figure is only about 1,000.

Bad habitat

Brown hares lead a particularly precarious existence in Switzerland's Central Plateau region. "Things are not looking good at all for brown hares in the flatter, most intensely farmed parts of the country," says Claudine Winter. Amid vast swathes of agricultural land, there are insufficient hedgerows and other biodiversity-enhancing boundaries for hares to shelter their young. Out in the open, they are an easy catch for foxes, wildcats, and birds of prey. Specific farming practices have also led to their decimation. Winter: "If farmers waited until as late as possible to mow their fields, this would help to protect hares – and roe deer too." But there are no regulations in Switzerland to encourage this practice.

Does the plight of the brown hare have any bearing on children's Easter experience? Barely, given that chocolate bunnies are the first members of the Leporidae family that many will ever see. Even in neighbourhoods like Hasenbühl or Hasenacker, the

likelihood of seeing a brown hare is extremely low to zero. Residential areas are completely alien to hares. Foxes are becoming much more common in built-up areas.

Prolific

Hares are seen as fertility symbols. The female can bear offspring up to four times a year. Indeed, few other wild animals breed as prolifically when the habitat is right. Nevertheless, it is the chocolatiers who hold the record: Lindt & Sprüngli produces around 150 million of its iconic Gold Bunnies every year around the world.

The ancestors of the brown hares that still live in Switzerland originally came from the steppes of Ukraine and southern Russia. They made their way over in the Neolithic period – along with crop farming.

Photo: iStock

