



LIVING WITH... HEDGEHOGS

One of Britain's most recognisable mammals, the European hedgehog is one of around 17 different species found throughout the world.

Hedgehogs have changed little over the last 15 million years and are widespread throughout England and Wales. Hedgehogs are generalists and have established themselves across a range of habitats, particularly in urban areas where they are a favourite amongst gardeners.

Nocturnal and primarily insectivorous, hedgehogs prey on invertebrates like slugs, beetles, caterpillars and earthworms. However, they may also eat amphibians, small rodents and birds, carrion, bird's eggs and even fruit. Hedgehogs will mate between April and September, but mainly between May and June in what is known as 'the rut'. Both male and female hedgehogs can mate several times a year with multiple partners. Litters usually consist of around four or five young, born between June and July.

Hibernation usually takes place between November and mid-March, although this is dependent on the weather and in mild years, hedgehogs have been active as late as December. Hedgehogs will often wake up and move their nest site at least once, if not more, during hibernation.

Hedgehogs are among Britain's most loved wildlife and have been immortalised by writers such as Beatrix Potter and William Shakespeare. BBC Wildlife magazine held a poll in 2013 to find "Britain's National Species" and the votes were overwhelmingly in favour of the hedgehog. It has been suggested that the popularity of the hedgehog comes from the fact that it is one of the only wild animals people have a chance of getting close to. Hedgehogs are also very popular with gardeners as they eat many 'pest' species such as slugs or caterpillars.

Despite their popularity, hedgehog numbers are thought



to be falling rapidly in the UK. It is thought that 30% of the British hedgehog population has been lost between 2002 and 2013. Increasing development results in the destruction and fragmentation of suitable habitats meaning that hedgehogs may now struggle to find food and suitable nest sites needed for hibernation. The building of new roads and the increasing traffic means that road casualties are now the most common cause of hedgehog deaths. Pesticides have been connected with the hedgehog's decline as they kill their prey and may even poison the hedgehogs directly. Garden hazards such as netting and ponds cause further casualties as hedgehogs can easily become trapped in them and starve, dehydrate or drown.

I have a cat / dog; will this be a problem for hedgehogs in my garden?

Cats do not normally pose a problem as they usually leave hedgehogs alone after initial investigation.

Dogs can attack hedgehogs, though they will rarely succeed in getting through their spines unless the hedgehog is sick or young. Try to keep dogs away from hedgehogs and monitor or keep your dog on a lead in the garden at dusk or night when you know the hedgehogs will be out. You can also 'warn' any hedgehog before you come outside by turning a light on.

Owners may worry about "hedgehog fleas" being passed to their pets; however they cannot survive on any species but hedgehogs.

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How can I help hedgehogs in my garden?

There are a number of things you can do to make your garden safer and more appealing to hedgehogs:

- **Hedgehog corridors:** Hedgehogs travel on average a mile a day and may be impeded by walls and fences. You can help by using fencing with gaps, removing a brick from the wall, cutting a hole in your fence or digging a tunnel underneath.
- **Hedgerows:** Swapping your wall or fencing for hedgerows provides a route in and out of your garden, as well as shelter for a range of wildlife.
- **Gardening:** Leave 'wild', insect-friendly areas in your garden to encourage invertebrates for hedgehogs to eat and provide shelter for the hedgehogs themselves. Check carefully for animals before moving or strimming your lawn and take care when turning over compost or leaf piles with a spade or pitch fork.
- **Log, compost or leaf piles:** Provide shelter for nesting mothers, young hoglets and hibernating hedgehogs, plus as havens for invertebrates they provide an all-year food supply.
- **Ponds:** Provide a natural source of water and attract invertebrates for hedgehogs to eat. Make sure you slope the edges of the pond or use stones to create 'steps' so that hedgehogs can climb out if they fall in!
- **Hedgehog homes:** Detailed plans for building a hedgehog house can be found at www.hedgehogstreet.org and www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk.



Should I put food out for hedgehogs in my area?

Supplementing a hedgehog's natural diet by leaving out food is a great way to help hedgehogs in your area.

Hedgehogs will love tinned dog or cat food and crushed dog or cat biscuits (not fish-based). Hedgehog food is also highly recommended and often available from suppliers of wild bird food.

Never feed hedgehog's bread and/or milk! Cow's milk can cause diarrhoea and bread is very low in nutrients.

Leave a shallow dish of fresh clean water every day. Clean the dish outside (not in the kitchen) every day with hot soapy water and rinse well.

- **Bonfires:** Always thoroughly disturb bonfires before lighting, as there could be hedgehogs nesting or hiding inside.
- **Netting:** Make sure that if you do have any netting in your garden that you ensure it is well above ground level as hedgehogs can easily become caught in netting or wire. Pack away or roll up fruit nets, tennis and goal nets or similar when not in use. The RSPCA recommends replacing any netting in your garden with solid metal mesh.
- **Drains and holes:** Hedgehogs can easily fall into uncovered drains or holes in your garden. Cover holes or check them every day to ensure no hedgehogs have become trapped.
- **Litter:** Litter is a big problem for all wild animals as they can become trapped, injured or choke; make sure your garden is clear of all litter.
- **Chemicals:** Slug pellets can poison hedgehogs and should be used only as a last resort. Instead try using one of many 'natural' alternatives, like crushed eggshells or coffee grounds. Wood preservatives can be ingested by hedgehogs and should be replaced with a wildlife-friendly water-based alternative. Pesticides will reduce the prey available to a hedgehog and should be used sparingly or not at all.
- **Sheds:** Don't close your shed doors if you usually keep them open, there may be hedgehogs nesting there. Make sure any dangerous chemicals or tools are kept well off the ground. Don't dismantle your shed around October time as hoglets may be nesting underneath the floor.

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I have disturbed a hedgehog, what should I do?

If the hedgehog is hibernating, gently replace the animal into the space, re-cover with old nest material and leave alone. If this is not possible then place the hedgehog in a large box or in a part of the garden the hedgehog will be safe and sheltered. Make sure the hedgehog can get out of the box easily.

If the hedgehog is not hibernating and has young hoglets, re-cover them and leave them alone. If this is not possible, please call the number below for advice. For further advice and information please visit <http://www.rspca.org.uk/>.

I have found a sick, injured or orphaned hedgehog, what should I do?

If you found a hedgehog that is clearly sick or injured, or an orphaned hoglet **that weighs less than 300g**, please call the RSPCA's cruelty and advice line number below.

If you think a hoglet might be orphaned and it **weighs more than 300g**, please read the RSPCA's "[Caring for autumn juvenile hedgehogs](#)" PDF on the RSPCA website for detailed instructions.



I have found a hedgehog out during the day, what should I do?

If the weather is not cold and the hedgehog seems healthy, it should be left alone. Provide food and water and monitor the situation. If it does not seem interested in the food, call the number below. If the weather is cold (frost, snow or below freezing) or the hedgehog is staggering, circling or obviously sick or injured then please call the number below.

To report an injured or sick hedgehog to the RSPCA please ring the 24-hour cruelty and advice line on **0300 1234 999**

If you see a dead hedgehog please report it to www.gardenwildlifehealth.org

