

# Hedgehog Ecology

Hedgehogs really are a gardeners best friend and well worth attracting into your gardens. They need all the help they can get from humans. Even though they are highly adaptable little creatures and have been here in some form or another since the cretaceous period they are now seriously endangered due in the main to human behaviour.

These discrete little mammals will trundle through your garden at night foraging and doing absolutely no harm to anyone or any garden.

During the spring and summer months an adult hedgehog needs to travel over a mile a night. They can have as many as five or six different 'temporary' nests in a distance that is about the size of a golf course, hence the need to be able to travel between gardens successfully.

In order for hedgehog populations to do well these are some of the things they need in gardens and open spaces:

- Long meadow grass
- Covered bushy areas
- Hedges
- Log piles with gaps underneath
- Large leaf piles
- Connectivity between gardens (a 13cm square gap in your garden fence)
- Access to fresh water – this can be provided in something low.
- Lots of invertebrates available for their food

If you have a hedgehog nesting in your garden in the summer months it may well be a nursing mother and it is really important that you do not make any major changes to your garden and disturb the nest. Clearing swathes of your 'messy areas' is the easiest way to disturb a nesting hedgehog and her hoglets.

If you are lucky enough to have a mum and her hoglets in your garden she will start to bring them out at night as they get to about three or four weeks old, she teaches them the home range and when they are old enough to 'leave home' they often nest very close to one another in the same area. They will use this home range for their entire lives. Making drastic changes to home ranges like stopping up fence gaps, changing the landscape or putting holes in the ground in the way of a natural hedgehog pathway can have profound effects on the hedgehogs that use the area and you may find that when once they visited they no longer do. It is important that we all work together to ensure hedgehogs have easy access to all of their home range.

During the winter months a hedgehog needs are very specialised and they can often find it very difficult to create nests.

When the temperature drops hedgehogs don't have much fur to keep them warm so they slow down. There is also very little natural food available to them as the weather gets colder. When autumn arrives the hedgehog will be slowing down and looking for a place to make a really good winter nest. They often make more than one nest before deciding which one they should spend the winter in. Their needs are highly specialised:

- They need thorny, dense and low lying bushes. Hedges that are thick and close to the ground with lots of dense bramble are ideal. These keep them safe from predators and stop the nesting materials from blowing away or getting wet.
- They also need medium sized deciduous leaves that do not rot easily, such as oak and hornbeam. They carry these in their mouths along with long grass and moss to their nesting places and use their paws and spines to shape their nests.

Their hibernaculums are waterproof and warm if they have been built properly and protect the hedgehog from predators such as rats. If you disturb a hibernating hedgehog during the winter months do not put it back unless it is awake. The hedgehog can take several days to awake from hibernation and often it will not be able to re-make the nest to the same quality as before.

**Please ring the rescue for advice if you disturb a nest.**

## **Food**

Hedgehogs have different dietary needs throughout the year. Their primary diet consists of:

- Caterpillars
- Beetles
- Leather jackets
- Worms
- Wire worms
- Millipedes
- Woodlice
- Earwigs

The more things you can put in your garden to encourage these insects the better. One of the biggest problems for hedgehogs currently is the lack of natural food. If you are not able to attract more insects with your planting then you can supplementary feed.

### **DO FEED:**

Meat based cat or dog food or Kitten biscuits that do not contain lactose.

### **DO NOT FEED:**

Milk – they are lactose intolerant, at best it will give them belly ache at worst it can kill them.

Bread – It swells in their tummies.

We have found at Suffolk Prickles that many of the hedgehogs in our hospital do not like food with a heavy content of grain, vegetables and fruit.

It is also a good idea to create a feeding station to put your food in as hedgehogs like to have something against their backs, they feel safer. A 13cm square hole in a plastic box turned upside down is good but remember to put out fresh food daily. If you find you have a regular visitor, you may find that they visit at a certain time each evening as they can tell the time!!

## **Hibernation Fact File**

A hedgehog does not always hibernate. It takes a huge amount of brown fat energy to wake up and if the hedgehog does not have enough brown fat it will not hibernate. For those that do go into Hibernation it is a complex process that involves the slowing of the metabolism to the point where it keeps only the major organs functioning at a low enough level to be able to kick start the system again.

A hedgehogs heart rate slows to about 20-30 beats per minute in hibernation. It's body temperature drops to about 3-4 degrees and it has the ability to warm it's body every so often to make sure it dies not freeze.

Hibernating hedgehogs breathe about once every two or three minutes.

A hedgehog that is hibernating is curled and if disturbed will tuck it's head in further and the spines will react to touch.

If you find a hibernating hedgehog it will be cold to touch, not appear to be breathing and curled in a tight ball. But...**beware**...as hedgehogs are coming out of hibernation often they will ping open and appear to be floppy, cold to touch and appear not to be breathing and they can be like this for up to 72 hours so please ask advice from a rescue if you are concerned.

## **What can you do to help hedgehogs in your garden?**

### **Change the way you garden**

Having a slightly overgrown garden in some places is really great for wildlife. Don't be too neat and tidy!!

- Create some large log piles that have space underneath for hedgehogs to create a nest.
- Leave a large leaf pile in a corner of your garden.
- Create a 13cmx13cm hole in your fence so a hedgehog can get easy access in and out of your garden
- Leave a small area of your garden to grow wild with some long grass and meadow flowers to encourage insects and to provide appropriate nesting material

- Plant hedging and allow it to be thick at the base and nice and dense with other plants growing through it.
- An open compost heap is a great place to attract bugs for food and warm for a temporary nest.
- Put out food and fresh water

### **Avoid hedgehog hazards**

- **Lawn and garden care** - Make sure any product you use on your lawn and garden is hedgehog and insect friendly. Some lawn feeds can cause burns on hedgehog feet, and also kill the invertebrates hedgehogs like to eat.
- **Slug pellets** are now banned from use but if you have some old ones hanging around please do not use them they are poisonous
- **Poison** - A hedgehog that is hungry will eat a dead rat or mouse. If they have been killed with poison this will also kill the hedgehog. Please be cautious when using poisons in your gardens.
- **Rat and mouse traps** are also dangerous to hedgehogs. We got lots of hedgehogs in to the rescue that have been injured severely by them.
- **Bonfires** – despite a very big campaign about bonfires and the damage they cause to hedgehogs because they are the perfect sleeping nest we still see hedgehogs with severe burns. Please do not set light to a bonfire where it has been sitting for a while and piling up. Move it to a new site as you start to burn the items.
- **DO NOT SET FIRE to pampas grass** without carefully checking through its thickest parts at the base for hedgehog nests. They make an absolutely fantastic nest for hedgehogs so beware.
- **Strimmers** – we get a lot of really nasty strimmer injuries into the rescue. Hedgehogs nest in the edges of hedges using the long grass as a camouflage. Please do not strim grass in and around hedges without checking for a hedgehog first.
- **Digging deep holes** and leaving them open overnight – hedgehogs are creatures of habit and like to use the same routes in their home ranges. If you change the route and dig a hole with their lack of depth perception they are very likely to fall in it and may get stuck there for days. Please cover new holes.
- **Drains** – please cover drains and drain holes. We rescue at least 6 hedgehogs a year who have fallen head first into tiny drain holes and cannot get out. These are the ones that are noticed there are many more who are not!!!
- **Netting** - Both pea netting, goal netting and tennis nets– if allowed to touch the floor can become a serious hazard for hedgehogs, they can get entangled in them and can get some really nasty injuries. Please lift them off the floor.
- **Ponds/ swimming pools** – hedgehogs can swim but if they cannot get out of the pond or swimming pool will tire and drown. Hedgehogs once they are in the water will swim around the outer edges of the pool or pond, make sure you have an area which is lower or a ramp of some sort which is at the edge of the pool or pond that can be accessed from the side.
- **Robot mowers** – there has been some research into robot mowers and it has been found that they can cause injuries to hedgehogs.

- **Do not clear large amounts of your garden all at once** – overgrown areas of gardens are ideal places for nesting hedgehogs. Clear a very small amount at a time and check it thoroughly before you do so.