

# Garden for Hedgehogs

Hedgehog numbers in Britain have undergone a long historic decline, with only around 1 million left in the UK. This may sound like a lot but, in the 1950s, there were more than 36 million of them. Between 2000-2014, hedgehog populations declined by over half in our countryside and nearly a third in our cities and suburbs. Population decline will be caused by many factors, most prominently habitat loss and agricultural practices.

But **we can all help**. The lifeline for our hedgehogs lies within our urban environments - in towns and cities, hedgehog populations seem stable. Recent analyses suggest the decline in hedgehog numbers, at least in urban areas, may be slowing and possibly even turning around.

By making small changes for wildlife in our gardens and outside spaces, together we can help this iconic species.

Hedgehogs are an important **indicator species**, which means their population numbers reflect how well wider ecosystems are doing and the health of the local environment in general.



## What are hedgehogs?

Most people know what hedgehogs look like, but what exactly are they?

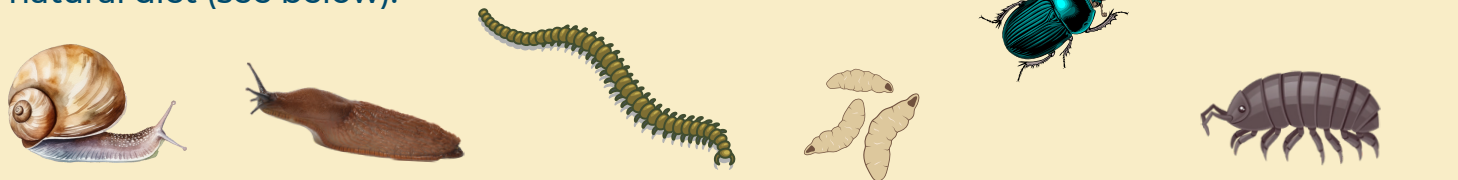
Hedgehogs are small spiny mammals that are part of the Erinaceidae family. The hedgehog's back and sides are covered in 25mm/1 inch long spines which are really modified hairs. Their face, chest, belly, throat, and legs don't have spines but are instead covered with coarse, grey-brown fur. There are approximately 5,000-7,000 spines on an average adult hedgehog. What many people do not know is that a hedgehog has a small tail.

Hedgehogs are nocturnal animals so, despite their charismatic spiny appearance, they are often difficult to find. They're solitary creatures, don't hold territories, and rely mainly on their hearing and sense of smell.



## Diet

Hedgehogs are certainly noisy eaters, but what do they eat? Studies shows they eat a lot of slugs, snails, and beetles, along with caterpillars, larvae, spiders, and earwigs. Hedgehogs are largely insect eaters but we can help supplement their natural diet (see below).



## How hedgehogs help us

Hedgehogs can be considered a **gardener's friend**.

When included as part of a healthy garden ecosystem, hedgehogs will help reduce the number of slugs, snails, and caterpillars that may otherwise cause havoc in our vegetable patch or flower beds.



# How we can help hedgehogs

## Hibernation

To encourage hedgehog hibernation in your garden, ensure there is easy access, leave some areas wild, and avoid 'tidying up' too much.

Hedgehogs tend to hibernate between November and mid-March and if you are lucky, may choose the stacks of leaves or branches in your garden as a safe spot to settle down. For this reason, if you need to burn such material to dispose of it, move it to different space immediately before setting alight. Be careful, as a hedgehog may be sheltering or hibernating in or beneath it. Light from one side only to allow an escape route for anything you may not have seen.

Hedgehogs like to nest under things (e.g. sheds, hedges, and brushwood) and need plenty of dry leaves to build their nest.



# Hedgehog Highways

Connectivity is key for the survival of our urban hedgehogs. They often travel between 1-2 miles a night in search of food, water, and a mate. Create 13 x 13cm (5 x 5") square holes in the bottom of fences or newly constructed walls so hedgehogs can come and go.

Use environmentally safe wood preservatives on sheds, fences etc as hedgehogs often lick new smells or substances – your garden centre should be able to advise you on what to use.



## Supplementing their natural diet

Hedgehogs love to eat insects like beetles, worms, and caterpillars, and they can also benefit from some additional protein - for example, meat-based pet food or crunchy, meaty hedgehog or cat biscuits.

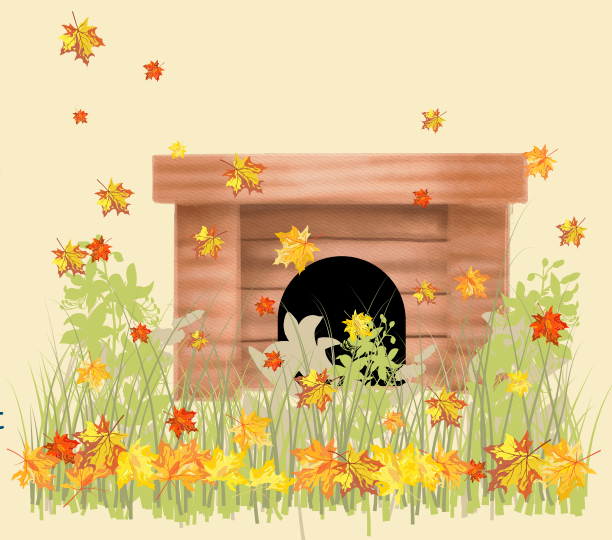
This is particularly helpful for them in periods of unseasonable weather. Shallow bowls of clean drinking water should also be available at several sites around the garden.



## Wild Patches

Leaving a wild patch is a great way to encourage more biodiversity in the garden. Flowering plants will attract greater numbers of insect species which in turn will provide a food source for our hedgehogs. Hedgehogs also use scrubby long grassland habitat as refuge and a place to nest.

Take care when mowing long grass and tidying wild patches, as they are an ideal place for a hedgehog's nest. When cutting long overgrown areas check for hedgehogs and other wildlife, then cut initially to about a foot long. Providing a suitable nesting or hibernating box can help prevent accidental disturbance.





# Compost Heaps

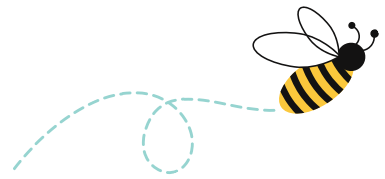
Another ideal place for a hedgehog to make a nest and rear its young, compost heaps really are a fantastic addition to any garden.

Take care when turning your compost heap in case there are hedgehogs there. The safest time to spread the heap is Oct/ Nov when most babies have left their mother and adults have not yet started to hibernate. Remember, partly-used bags of compost may also have nesting hedgehogs in them.



# Deadwood Piles

Simple to build, a log pile of rotting wood attracts countless animals, including the insects that hedgehogs like to eat. Any size pile will help, but the bigger you can make it the better for nesting sites. As the wood rots down, replenish the logs from time to time.



## Accumulating Materials

Don't be too hasty when tidying up your garden; green waste, leaves, and brushwood can be used by hedgehogs to build nests. Nests are refuges by day, vital for breeding and keeping young safe, and essential for winter survival for hibernation. These types of nests are called hibernacula.





# Hazards to Hedgehogs

## Slug Pellets

Slugs and snails killed by pellets will be readily eaten by hedgehogs (and other garden wildlife including blackbirds). Sadly, it is highly likely that this will kill the animal. All chemicals available for use in the garden, from herbicides, to insecticides and rodenticides, will negatively impact the health of hedgehogs and the wider ecosystems.

There are many natural alternatives to slug pellets available on the market. Avoid chemicals where possible and use organic products where necessary. Try to encourage natural predators of pest invertebrate species, such as hedgehogs, frogs, and toads, by installing Hedgehog Highways, wild areas, and wildlife ponds.



## Netting

Flexible netting that's used for covering plants and fruit, as well as tennis nets, fishing nets, and suchlike can be a major hazard because hedgehogs can easily become entangled in them. Try to raise nets above ground level in the daytime and check them regularly.

## Ponds

Whilst a fantastic garden biodiversity booster, garden ponds can present a danger. Hedgehogs can swim and are sometimes attracted to them, but they may drown if they cannot get out.

Gardeners should ensure that there are slipways around the edge of the water to enable the hedgehogs to escape. Half-submerged rocks or even a piece of chicken wire are suggested. Pond levels should be kept topped up.



## Drains

Keep drain holes covered: this stops both leaves and hedgehogs blocking the drain. Check uncovered holes or dips daily, like drains, trenches for growing beans, and holes for deck footings, to make sure no hedgehogs or other wildlife are trapped. Provide escape routes from any holes or dips if possible using rigid plastic netting which can't tangle, or a plank with battens.

