

October wildlife

Why hedgehogs need our help

Hedgehogs, once common and much loved – they were voted Britain's National Animal Species in 2013 – are gardeners' friends, as they feed on animals including species regarded as pests such as slugs, caterpillars and leatherjackets. Yet they are in trouble. Populations have fallen sharply in recent years, but this is part of a longer decline – their numbers plummeted from an estimated 36.5 million in the 1950s to 1.5 million in 1995, and since 1995 have fallen 5 percent a year. The intensification of farming, loss of hedgerows, habitat fragmentation and declines in their prey populations are among a range of factors thought to be responsible.

Fortunately, there is much home gardeners can do to help (for seven good ways, see opposite), as gardens and other urban green spaces can be excellent hedgehog habitat. They need space, so access between plots is vital – hedgehogs typically forage over a kilometre or two (about 1 mile) each night, and may range across 10 to 50ha (25 to 125 acres) during summer in search of food, a mate and nesting sites, so even the largest gardens are unlikely to provide a hedgehog with all its needs year-round.

Hedgehogs and the most recent research

Western European hedgehogs (*Erinaceus europaeus*) are widely distributed across Great Britain and Ireland. Adults reach 28cm (10in) in length, weigh around a kilo (2¼lb), have a short tail and surprisingly long legs – usually hidden under the 'skirt' formed by the loose, prickly skin that allows the animals to roll into a defensive ball.

The State of Britain's Hedgehogs 2018, a joint report by the British Hedgehog Preservation Society and People's Trust for Endangered Species (PTES) – who run Hedgehog Street, a practical website on improving gardens as hedgehog habitats – shows stark differences between 'hog' numbers in rural and urban areas.

A study published as recently as September found hedgehogs in only 21 percent of 261 sites surveyed in rural England and Wales. The highest rural populations are in areas with some built environment: the edges of towns and villages, proving gardens are becoming refuges for hedgehogs the countryside can no longer support.

Some urban populations by contrast are rising. Post-2012, the PTES *Living with Mammals* survey found higher weekly hog counts than before, and more sites had hogs in the British Trust for Ornithology's Garden BirdWatch survey. This data, mostly from urban and suburban gardeners, suggests recent conservation work is bearing fruit. All gardeners – rural, urban or suburban – can help by giving habitat and homes to hedgehogs. ○



FUPA / ANDREW MASON

1 Make 15 x 15cm (6 x 6in) square 'hog holes' in the bases of your solid garden boundaries. This links your plot to the wider landscape, helping to reverse habitat fragmentation.



PAUL LIVESAY / HEDGEHOG CHAMPION

2 Provide log piles, leaf piles, compost heaps or bespoke hedgehog 'hibernation houses'. Place these in quiet corners for hedgehogs to use in the day while they are inactive, and do not be too tidy – log piles, compost heaps and slightly unkempt areas support more invertebrate prey.



3 Hedgehogs need drinking bowls of clean fresh water. If you have a pond, ensure at least one side slopes gently so animals have an easy way to reach, or get in and out of, the water.

4 Leave a few windfallen fruit on the ground: hedgehogs are omnivores and don't turn their noses up at fruit, birds eggs, unwary frogs – even carrion.



ALAMY / NICK UPTON



ALAMY / JULIE N WOODHOUSE

5 Supplementary foods: offer commercial hedgehog food, wet cat food (above) or cat biscuits (never bread and milk as hedgehogs cannot digest lactose, the main sugar in milk).

6 Avoid using pesticides. If you do use slug pellets, choose a brand based on ferric phosphate, rather than more toxic metaldehyde.

7 Extra feeding is especially important in autumn, as hedgehogs need to fatten up to sustain themselves through hibernation. A major reason for their falling numbers is thought to be population declines in hedgehogs' prey, especially soil invertebrates such as worms and insect larvae.



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Resources

For more, visit hedgehogstreet.org, britishhedgehogs.org.uk and ptes.org/campaigns/hedgehogs