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Factsheet Number 8

Hedgehogs

Introduction

Unfortunately our most common sightings of hedgehogs (*Erinaceus europaeus*) are the bodies of dead animals beside the road. This factsheet aims to tell you a little about these popular mammals and how you can help them survive the rigours of modern life.

Easily recognised, their upper bodies are covered by modified hairs in the form of about 5000 spines. Strong muscles beneath their skin enable them to curl up at any hint of danger and present their spines to the threat. While this may protect them from a marauding fox, it is little defence against a speeding car.

Underneath all those spines, hedgehogs have surprisingly long legs and they may roam up to two miles in a single night. Their home range can extend up to sixty acres. Sometimes hedgehogs use their long legs to climb into the lower branches of shrubs to search for caterpillars.

Diet

Hedgehogs feed on a variety of invertebrates. Earthworms and slugs are readily eaten, particularly during damp weather when such creatures are often abundant. Also, the hard outer casings of beetles, millipedes, woodlice and snails, can be easily broken by using their sharp teeth. They are most active around dusk, when they hunt for food making loud, snuffling noises. They feed at night, not because they have many predators, but because there is a wider variety of insects around then. Some hedgehogs frequent orchards, but only to take advantage of the creatures attracted to the fruit.

Where hedgehogs live

They live in a variety of locations, including hedgerows and thickets, but are most often seen in gardens. Lawns provide excellent grounds for food hunting, while the garden hedge or compost heap provides cover. If a mound of bonfire material is left around for even a few days they move into that, so be careful around November 5th!

Hibernation

In winter hedgehogs hibernate, as their invertebrate food becomes scarce with the colder weather. Hibernation can begin as early as October, although some hedgehogs can still be seen in December. They seek out a dry, frost-free place like a compost heap and construct a winter sleeping chamber or hibernaculum, usually incorporating a large number of dry leaves.

During hibernation they become torpid, breathing only once every six seconds. Their heartbeat drops to one tenth its normal rate and their body temperature takes on that of the surrounding air. Although hedgehogs regain consciousness most weeks during winter, they only leave the nest if the temperature has fallen sufficiently to threaten their survival, when they will seek out warmer shelter.

Making a hedgehog home

One way of looking after your hedgehogs is to provide them with somewhere to hibernate. This can be done by constructing a hedgehog home. You will need the following timber: 4 lengths of 1200mm x 100mm x 20mm unplanned, 2 lengths of 1350mm x 100mm x 20mm unplanned, 1 length of 450mm x 100mm x 20mm unplanned, 14 lengths of 300mm x 50mm x 25mm laths.

To make the base cut one of the 1200mm lengths of timber into 300mm lengths. Attach these to two lengths of lath. Repeat for the top. For the back, attach three 450mm lengths of the same size timber to two laths. Drill a 125mm hole in the top 450mm length for an air pipe. To make the front you will need another three pieces of 450mm timber, but this time use four laths, ensuring that the middle laths are at least 125mm apart. Then cut a 125mm square hole in the middle of the lower front.

For each side you should attach three 300mm lengths of timber to two laths. Fix the various parts together making sure the laths on the base are on the outside. You should then make an entrance tunnel 100mm high, 75mm wide and 380mm long, to fit over the outside of the front hole. When complete, place a ventilation pipe through the hole in the back, covering it with 25mm mesh so your hedgehog will not block it. Put the box in your compost heap, hedge or bank with sticks for cover like a bonfire pile, with the ends of the tunnel and air pipe, important for keeping condensation to a minimum, clear. It is important that you do not use any glue or treat the wood with any type of preservative. Remember there is no guarantee that hedgehogs will use the home. Just like a bird box it might lie empty for several years before being occupied.

Breeding

After emerging from hibernation in the spring, the male (boar) goes in search of a mate (sow). When they meet they perform a kind of courtship dance, circling each other repeatedly, sometimes for hours on end. Occasionally the sow will give the boar a sharp butt in the side. If, after all this, the male has not lost interest, the female lowers her spines to allow mating to take place. The male then takes no further part in raising the young, but goes off in search of other females.



For the month after mating, the sow increases her food consumption and builds a nest. This is larger than the nests hedgehogs use to sleep in during the day, of which there may be several in the home range. About thirty days after mating, 4-5 young are born. New born hedgehogs have no spines, but about 100 soft white ones push through their skin within minutes of birth. After about two weeks brown spines start to appear and their eyes open. After a further month, the young hedgehogs are able to go in search of food with their mother. By eight weeks they are one-fifth the adult size and leave the nest. If they are to survive the winter, it is crucial that they double their weight in the following couple of months.

Caring for hedgehogs

Some people have kept hedgehogs as pets, but this cannot be recommended. Not only should they be allowed their freedom, but it will be difficult for you to provide them with the right food or conditions. They are also host to large numbers of fleas, ticks and other parasites as they find it pretty difficult to clean thoroughly among all those spines. However, if you find a young hedgehog in September which has definitely been orphaned keep it somewhere warm, such as a 'hedgehog home', feed it on minced meat, liver, meat-based dog or cat food and scrambled egg until it is a least 0.45kg (1lb) in weight (*not* milk, as more than a little can be harmful). Then release it during warm, dry weather, to search for a winter home.

Dangers

Apart from road casualties, hedgehogs can also come to grief in cattle grids and ponds. If they fall into a cattle grid they find it impossible to climb out again, unless a ramp has been inserted into the corner for that purpose and unless ponds have gently sloping sides, they are liable to drown. If you have to use slug pellets, put them inside a pipe too small for hedgehogs, otherwise you may poison them too. Don't forget that hedgehogs are excellent at eating slugs!