

NATURE NOTES - HEDGEHOGS AND BONFIRES

Hedgehogs have declined dramatically over the past fifty years or so, and are now very much confined to towns and villages. Netherbury is one of these refuges, and is home to a small, but precarious population of hedgehogs.

Bonfires are traditionally popular at this time of year, owing to the build up of shrub and tree clippings in gardens. But bonfires (or rather piles of sticks and shrub cuttings) also act as magnets for hedgehogs. Hedgehogs find bonfires the perfect support structure for their hibernation nests. It is therefore vitally important that we think about the needs of our local hedgehog population when building and lighting bonfires. During October hedgehogs go into hibernation, owing to the decline of invertebrate food at this time of year. They build their hibernaculum with medium-sized deciduous leaves (oak for example) and seek suitable habitats (like unlit bonfires) under which to construct them. It is therefore important NOT to build a bonfire and leave it for several days before lighting it. Such a standing pile of vegetation will undoubtedly attract hedgehogs. Research has shown that a hedgehog in hibernation takes up to twelve hours to become active from the moment of arousal. The Dorset Mammal Group has published guidelines for building and lighting bonfires in autumn, which are based on two simple rules.

1. Either construct a bonfire during the course of one day and ignite it before dark that same day.
2. Or build a bonfire over several days and move it entirely before lighting it. This could be achieved by simply starting a small fire nearby and moving the original bonfire contents bit-by-bit onto the flames. Either way, if we all follow these guidelines it will help to prevent hedgehogs from being burned alive.

Please share this important information with anyone you know who might be interested, and more especially with anyone you know who favours bonfires at this time of year.

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