

HEDGEHOGS IN APRIL

A remarkable event takes place this month, as slowly, silently and secretly, adult hedgehogs stir from hibernation. The hedgehog is only one of two British wild mammals that hibernate, the other being the dormouse. During hibernation hedgehogs reduce their body temperature from 30°C to under 10°C. Simultaneously their pulse rate drops from 200 beats per minute to less than 20 and breathing becomes very slow and spasmodic. These dramatic changes have evolved to enable the hedgehog to survive without nourishment for around five months of the year. No wonder recovering from this deep bodily shutdown takes an animal around twelve hours before it can become active.

A hedgehog emerging from hibernation will be emaciated, having lost at least one gram of fat reserves per day during hibernation. Offering hedgehogs food after dark now will help them to replenish this weight loss. Provide dog meat in loaf or jelly (not gravy) form, mixed with small cat biscuits. Also, always offer plenty of fresh water as hedgehogs drink lots.

The hedgehog is an endearing creature, much loved by humans and has been voted Britain's favourite wild animal. But sadly this species is in trouble and has declined from a UK population of thirty million in the 1960s to less than five hundred thousand today. During this time hedgehogs have disappeared from much of the countryside (for a variety of reasons) and are now found mainly in urban habitats, where they might feel safe, but face new dangers.

The hedgehog population in Netherbury is small and tenuous, so it is in our gardens where hedgehog conservation is so important. We can all help to make a difference to the plight of this roving, nocturnal mammal by making our own gardens more hedgehog friendly.

Allow hedgehogs access to gardens by making holes (15cm diameter) in solid walls or fences and at the same time provide food and shelter.

Making a hedgehog house tucked away under bushes or a hedge to provide a place for them to rest or even raise a family.

Don't use slug pellets, there is no such thing as an environmentally friendly slug pellet. Slug pellets denude hedgehogs of the very food they seek, in the form of slugs and snails. If hedgehogs consume slug pellets, or poisoned slugs, they can become very sick indeed.

Make sure ponds or swimming pools are not death traps for hedgehogs. Hedgehogs can swim and are not afraid to plop into water. But they need easy access to get out.

The three greatest dangers to hedgehogs living amongst us are dog bites, garden machinery like strimmers and robotic mowers and after-dark traffic. Dog bites can be prevented, by putting a muzzle on a dog, before letting it out for its last comfort break before bedtime. Robotic mowers must never be used after dark, and strimmers should only be used after checking carefully for sleeping hedgehogs first.

Cars at night pose a very serious problem for hedgehogs. The spines which offer hedgehogs protection against most natural dangers cannot compete with cars. A hedgehog crossing a road, hears a car approaching, senses danger and rolls itself into a ball – squash! It is as simple as that. So please take extra care when driving through the village after dark. Take it slowly and watch carefully for meandering hedgehogs.

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