

Biodiversity and the Hedgehog

By kind permission of Natasha Winn, MSc; BSc Hons; HNC Marine Life and Environmental Studies.
Hedgely Hogspital, Abercych, Pembrokeshire

Why are hedgehogs important to the ecosystem?

Hedgehogs are an Indicator Species; they act as a barometer for the health of our local environment. When hedgehogs are thriving it's reasonable to assume that other creatures will be too, and that all is well in the local environment.

A thriving hedgehog population indicates a plentiful supply of invertebrates, good diversity of habitat and connectivity of the natural environment. Where hedgehogs are in decline, as they are in much of the UK today, this is likely due to a paucity of invertebrates, dwindling and fragmented habitat. These factors are all indicators of general poor environmental health which will eventually impact other species, including humans.

Their role in the ecosystem: Hedgehogs have a key role in maintaining a healthy ecosystem as they work to control insect populations, including keeping gardens healthy. They are now on the red (danger) list, and their numbers are now only a third of what they were 50 years ago.

According to estimates, around 100,000 hedgehogs are killed annually on our roads alone. The loss of prey availability has also impacted its numbers. The increase in use of pesticides and chemical treatments has devastated the insect population, which are hedgehog's main source of food. Paired with the loss of their natural habitat, this has had a negative impact on their population numbers.

Link to the hedgehog ecology and land management-<https://www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Hedgehog-Street-HEMP-guide.pdf>

Threats to hedgehogs

- ❖ Decline in invertebrate numbers & foraging areas (rough grassland, hedgerows, scrub). Within gardens foraging areas lost to paving & decking (loss of biodiversity)
- ❖ Loss of habitat for nesting/hibernating such as scrub and wild undisturbed areas.
- ❖ Habitat fragmentation, more faster wider roads and secure gardens with lack of access.
- ❖ Pesticides, which reduce numbers of invertebrate prey and kill hedgehogs which eat poisoned invertebrates.
- ❖ Hazards e.g. ponds with straight sides, netting,
- ❖ Litter, especially cans and cups containing food remains.

Things you can do at home to minimize threats

- ❖ Don't use chemicals if you have to use chemicals it should be last resort and natural alternatives should always be tried first.
- ❖ Keep pea netting 1 ft of the ground. Football netting raised up at night
- ❖ Bonfires: check any pile of brash etc. before burning it.
- ❖ Ensure ponds have access which allows hedgehogs to exit ponds if they fall in; eg a ramp.
- ❖ Litter picks.

What can be done by the Council?

- ❖ Check planning applications in areas where hedgehogs are recorded.
- ❖ Work with allotment holders and schools to widen survey, improve conditions for hedgehogs and improve links between areas known to be used by hedgehogs
- ❖ Make installation of hedgehog highways a condition of planning permission where appropriate.
- ❖ Encourage everyone to ensure netting is about 30cms above ground so hedgehogs can pass underneath and store unused netting in sheds etc and remove all discarded dumped netting immediately.
- ❖ Install 13 x 13 cm holes at fence bases where appropriate to link gardens and greens spaces to keep hedgehogs away from roads as much as possible.
- ❖ Stop pesticide use (including herbicides and fungicides) except in exceptional circumstances so hedgehogs can find enough invertebrates and don't eat poisoned ones.
- ❖ Encourage planting of native species rich hedgerows wherever appropriate, in school grounds, parks, allotments, sports grounds. Provide protected areas for shelter & hibernation. Look after the wild plants and manage the land to encourage native plants already there and in the seedbank. Native plants support more invertebrates and therefore more native animals such as birds and bats.
- ❖ Hedge Plants to Improve Biodiversity - [Hedgerow biodiversity | Hedgelinek](#)
- ❖ Ensure ponds have access which allows hedgehogs to exit ponds if they fall in, eg a ramp.
- ❖ Highlight the importance of green corridors between sites which have hedgehogs and encourage hedgehog friendly features along these corridors.
- ❖ Ensure maintenance council workers are aware of steps to take to limit the risk of unnecessary injury to wildlife etc. Check before strimming, add stickers to garden tools, don't use strimmers on long grass or scrub unless you check before first for wildlife.
- ❖ Check before lighting fires and clearing scrub land
- ❖ Highlight the importance of green corridors between sites which have hedgehogs and encourage hedgehog friendly features along these corridors.
- ❖ Ground workers to be aware on the dangers of bonfires to hedgehogs, bonfires or piles of brash should always be checked for wildlife before burning.
- ❖ Ensure ponds have access which allows hedgehogs to exit ponds if they fall in, eg a ramp.
- ❖ If chemicals are going to be used, use ways to limit the negative impact, chemicals should be last resort and natural alternatives should always be tried first. Question if it is necessary?
- ❖ Do benchmark studies of insect populations, increase protection for insects by the way the land is managed.
- ❖ Encourage wild areas and bug hotels
- ❖ Encourage community run places to keep pea netting one foot off the ground, football and sports netting should be raised up at night so hedgehogs can freely pass underneath

Appropriate Timing

- ❖ Scrub clearance: Oct-March (observe weather and act accordingly) this will ensure that birds are not disturbed during the nesting season. Note this is also hedgehog hibernation time SO EXTRA CARE NEEDED
- ❖ Coppicing: When leaves have dropped, mid winter Tree planting approx. Nov – Feb
- ❖ Pond/ditch work: Sept and October are the best months; most amphibians will have left ponds by then and will not have started hibernating.
- ❖ Fires on site Oct to March: Build and light on the day. Hedgehogs make use of un burnt bonfires to nest
- ❖ Hedge trimming Nov to Feb: It is not necessary to cut hedges every year, Natural England recommends that hedges are cut only twice over a six year period. Consider cutting sides of a hedge on rotation.
- ❖ Grass cutting Sept to Oct: Leave till late summer to ensure the seed has set, always try to remove any cuttings that you produce (you can either pile them up on site as a habitat pile or remove them off site and compost them)

Adding value

- ❖ Bat boxes / bird boxes; volunteers to check, clean and record who is using them, or a website/number the public can log what wildlife they have seen.
- ❖ Leave some wild areas as insect refugia.
- ❖ Make log piles and/or stag beetle loggeries. Leave dead wood on site whenever it is safe to do so as is important for invertebrates, fungi and creatures that eat them.
- ❖ Maintain main paths in good condition and discourage trampling elsewhere within your site as this will reduce biodiversity.

Further information

For advice about hedgehogs and how to look after them visit <https://www.hedgehogstreet.org/> and <https://www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk/>

Hedgehog Street is a partnership between the British Hedgehog Preservation Society and People's Trust for Endangered Species.

New state of British Hedgehogs report 2022 <https://www.hedgehogstreet.org/state-of-britains-hedgehogs-2022/>

British Hedgehogs Roll of Honor: <https://www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk/hedgehog-heroes-roll-honour/>

Hedgerow Biodiversity: <https://hedgelink.org.uk/hedgerows/hedgerow-biodiversity/>

Amateur Entomologists' Society: <https://www.amentsoc.org/insects/insects-and-man/gardening-for-insects.html>