A prickly problem

The hedgehog is the gardener’s friend, an icon of the British countryside and regularly voted one of our best-loved animals, so why is it disappearing? HUGH WARWICK investigates the secret lives of our spiny neighbours to find out what’s happening.

THE EXPERT

HUGH WARWICK has counted hedgehogs in Orkney, radio-tracked them around Devon and helped to rescue them from the cull in the Outer Hebrides. They have become an obsession for him.

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A NIGHT IN THE LIFE OF AN URBAN HEDGEHOG

STEPPING OUT
After spending the day sleeping in the shade of a sunny shrub or on the grassy border, a hedgehog sets out across the lawn at dusk, sniffing for worms. A hedgehog has a superb sense of smell. You might be able to hear the telltale snuffling of a hedgehog, freshly emerged from its winter sleep, foraging hungrily after its long winter fast. You might hear the telltale snuffling of a hedgehog, freshly emerged from its winter sleep, foraging hungrily after its long winter fast.

IS SOMETHING STIRRING in your herbaceous border? Or sniffing through last year’s dessicated leaves? Though the March evenings are still long and dark, spring is flowing north across Britain, carrying with it the promise of spring flowers and warm weather. It is time for our local heroes, hedgehogs, to come out of their winter sleep and start exploring.

The hedgehog has become something of a modern peril. In town, the hedgehog has to brave the attentions of the family dog. The owners have left out a bowl of treats for the dog, and the dog finds itself getting a little restless. The hedgehog curls into a ball and waits until the dog gets bored and leaves.

MODERN PERILS
In town, the hedgehog has to brave several roads on its nightly forays. This one narrowly escapes the wheels of a passing car.

EASY PICKINGS
Beyond the road is a pasture where our hedgerow friends have plenty to eat. Once again, the hedgehog is out and about. It is time for our local heroes, hedgehogs, to come out of their winter sleep.

Take a few moments to stop and listen. You might hear the telltale snuffles of a hedgehog, emerging from a hole beneath a tree stump, a hedgehog begins a nightly patrol along the edge of nearby fields in search of morsels.

A PRICKLY MOMENT
The next encounter is more favourable. Our male discovers a female ready to mate. He relies on an extra-long penis to navigate beneath her spiny coat.

OUTFOXING THE FOX
When it comes to rural situations, our hedgerow friends are more likely to be outfoxed by the fox. The fox is a natural predator of the hedgehog.

TUG OF WORM
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To answer these questions and discover more about the secret life of the hedgehog, the PTES and the British Hedgehog Preservation Society launched HogWatch in 2007 – a survey that recorded sightings by members of the public – capitalising on the fact that, for most of us, seeing a hedgehog is a memorable event. Many of us help hedgehogs to cross the road, and we might even wake up the kids if we spotted one scuttling across the lawn.

OUR SURVEY SAID...
Borns in a specially constructed nest, young hedgehogs are ready to explore the wider world at three to four weeks old. They scatter in the direction of a potential prey item or a place they learn what to eat and want to avoid. A week or two later, the youngsters will set off on their own.

This correlates with anecdotal evidence from hedgehog carers across the country, nearly all of whom have noted a decrease in the number of hedgehogs brought to them.

In Britain, there are two sorts of hedgehog: the rural and the urban/suburban. HogWatch revealed that both populations are declining, and experts are now attempting to assess the causes.

When it comes to rural hedgehogs, researchers believe the problem may lie in the size and type of fields, since it appears that the larger the fields, the smaller the hedgehog population. This makes perfect sense when you consider hedgehog behaviour: these creatures are not called ‘hedgehogs’ for nothing – few animals are as keen on hogging hedges as they are. Though their spines offer good protection against larger predators, hedgehogs are slow moving and therefore still vulnerable to predators such as badgers and the occasional tawny owl, so they tend to stay close to the cover of field boundaries.

This behaviour is especially true for females with young. In spring, they build nests on the margins of fields before giving birth to four or five young, which they need to visit regularly. When foraging, she will never stray far from the nest.

The hedgehog has become something of an icon. When the Environment Agency desired a mammalian equivalent of Silent Spring, it called for votes on a range of candidates. It was the hedgehog that won.

Given our obvious affection for the hog, it is relatively easy to believe that our most cherished animal will continue to thrive. But the reality is that these populations have yet to undergo the severe decline suffered by their western brethren.

The hedgehog is so familiar that we often fail to recognise that it shares many of our own characteristics – a bit clumsy, occasionally grumpy and always keen on a good supper.

But the results of the Mammals on Roads survey, published in 2005, were shocking. The study, by the People’s Trust for Endangered Species (PTES), examined annual roadkill statistics and compared them over time. The figures revealed that, between 2001 and 2005, hedgehog deaths had fallen nationally by 20 per cent.

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THEY LOOK AS IF IT IS A BUBBLEBATH. EXPERTS ARE NOT SURE WHY THEY DO THIS.

DID YOU KNOW? HogWatch is a project that encourages citizens to monitor hedgehog populations in their area. It is a community-based citizen science project that uses radio telemetry to track the movements of individual hedgehogs.

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A study in the Netherlands showed that hedgehogs spend nearly 60 per cent of their time either in or within five metres of hedges and woodland edges. And 80 per cent of their all-important day-nests, where they curl up to sleep, hidden from eager eyes and inquisitive noses, were located in hedges and woodlands.

Hedgehogs are particularly important to the British woodland edge habitat that is the hog’s natural home. So it is tragic that half of the UK’s remaining hedgehogs have been destroyed since 1950. Though many farms now have environmental stewardship schemes in place to encourage care and replacement, hedges are still disappearing through neglect and poor management, leaving the depressing view of lines of straggly trees strung together with lengths of wire fencing. Useless for hedgehogs.

Loss of hedges fragments hedgehog habitat in the same way as developments and roads, creating islands of isolated biodiverse habitat. Such islands are very vulnerable. It’s hogs may find it difficult or impossible to cross the barriers between them, so if a resident hedgehog population becomes impossible to cross the barriers between them, it’s vulnerable. It’s hogs may find it difficult or impossible to cross the barriers between them.

DID YOU KNOW? A hedgehog defends itself by rolling up into a ball. It lives this by contracting special muscles under the spiny skin. The head, legs and tail are forced inside the contracting ball.

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HOW TO HELP HEDGEHOGS

Here are some tips for making your garden more hedgehog-friendly

1. DON’T BE TOO TIDY! Leave undisturbed areas where hedgehogs can forage and shelter.
2. CREATE COMFORTABLE HABITAT. Provide places that give it to us.
3. PROVIDE SHELTER. Simply lean a piece of wood against a wall or build a hibernation box.
4. AVOID PESTICIDES AND CHEMICALS. Provide shelter simply lean a piece of wood against a wall or build a hibernation box.
5. ACT ON! Watch out for mating hedgehogs when using lawnmowers and strimmers.

Hedgehog sightings are increasing in gardens everywhere. When using lawnmowers and strimmers.

HOW TO SEE A HEDGEHOG: You don’t need a garden to see a hedgehog – just a bit of the wonders of British wildlife – hedgehog watching. For more details of the hogwatch survey, visit www.hogwatch.org.uk

You will find a temporary nest – during the day, a hedgehog in a neglected flowerbed. And, bearing in mind that the badger and hedgehog tend to compete for the same prey (worms, beetles and other invertebrates), any pressure on the food supply may cause their relationship to change from competitors to the more sinister predator and prey. Badger culling in an attempt to stop the spread of bovine tuberculosis (TB).

Many people believe there is a direct link between the presence of badgers and the disappearance of hedgehogs. Independently, the British Hedgehog Preservation Society has received a number of letters from the farming lobby, trying to muster support for a re-emption of badger culling in an attempt to stop the spread of bovine tuberculosis (TB).

I know painfully well that badgers eat hedgehogs. The very first article I wrote for BBC Wildlife in the early 1990s covered some individuals I was radio-tracking in Devon. All was going well until disaster struck – a badger ate three of my hogs. I even came across Little Willy in the process of being consumed. It was a sad time for me (and a reminder of why naming your study subjects is not a good idea). Yet badgers and hedgehogs have been living side by side for millions of years – indeed, some of the areas that have experienced the most dramatic decreases in hedgehog populations are those with the fewest badgers. Moreover, in some parts of the country, the two species are co-habiting without any decline in numbers, so whether there is a direct link between badgers and the hedgehog’s demise remains unclear.

One explanation for the badger theory is that the way we have altered our environment has made it harder for hedgehogs to avoid these muddlesth. Both species use hedges as natural homes. So it is tragic that half of the UK’s remaining hedges have been destroyed since 1950. Though many farms now have environmental stewardship schemes in place to encourage care and replacement, hedges are still disappearing through neglect and poor management, leaving the depressing view of lines of straggly trees strung together with lengths of wire fencing. Useless for hedgehogs.

As a result, hedgehogs have moved into urban areas, where food is more readily available. This has led to a decline in the hedgehog population, as many have been tempted to opt for low-maintenance decking and patios instead of grass and shrubs – a disaster for wildlife. With all these changes, urban hedgehogs are left with fewer places to forage and their regular routes blocked by unsightly fences, new and busier roads and denser housing.

We all need a little bit of wild in our lives, and the hedgehog is the perfect creature to give it to us.

There is also an interesting link between the geographical spread of TB and hedgehog distribution. The transmission of TB between cattle and badgers appears to be reduced in eco-friendly farms with smaller fields and more hedges – the same habitats that favour hedgehogs.

The answer is, predictably, linked to loss of habitat to development and an increase in barriers to movement. Every garden that is built on, every allotment and playing field that is destroyed removes hedgehog habitat. The recent house-price boom has encouraged people to develop their land, and with our ever-busier lives, so does the future spell doom and gloom for the hedgehog? By no means. This is actually a great opportunity. We have an iconic species that we simply must do our best to save. It is a creature for which we have near unanimity of affection. But to help the hog, we have to do more than rely on experts to “preserve” it, like some sort of spiky jam. We all need to protect and encourage the habitat that the hedgehog requires to thrive, and anyone with a garden can help (see box, left).

We all need a little bit of wild in our lives, and the hedgehog is the perfect creature to give it to us. By actively helping this much-loved animal, we can also help ourselves.

FIND OUT MORE

British Hedgehog Preservation Society: www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk

ON THE FORUM

If you have any hedgehog stories, observations or encounters to share, visit our forum at www.britishwildlifemagazine.com

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