

# SOS For Hedgehogs



The much-loved, once-common creature has seen a disastrous population crash. It's not the badgers' fault, it's ours and we need to put things right, says Polly Pullar

**H**EDGEHOGS are in serious trouble. Since the 1950s when they numbered an estimated 30 million, the population has crashed to fewer than one million. At this rate, one of our most popular mammals could be consigned to the realms of history.

Hedgehogs are delightful. Ancient creatures that have had little need to evolve over 1.5 million years, they hibernate and have an ability to roll up into a tight ball. They hide surprisingly long legs under their prickles and are agile climbers, running fast when the need arises.

This wild mammal lets us get close and doesn't fight or

flee. When frightened it usually curls up until the threat has passed. This reaction is disastrous with traffic.

Hedgehogs visit urban gardens at dusk, searching for invertebrates or for the food we leave out. Their diet is based on slugs, snails, worms and other invertebrates, fallen fruit, eggs and carrion. They relish dog and cat food.

On game-rearing estates, hedgehogs were heavily persecuted due to their habit of stealing the eggs of ground-nesting birds, and frequently ended up as pathetic husks on a gamekeeper's gibbet alongside a host of other unfortunates classified as "vermin".

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Adorable... but in serious danger of being wiped out





Most mornings, heart-rending petitions fill my email inbox. Nearly all relate to global crises in the natural world: climate change, habitat destruction, sprawling development, pesticides, chemicals, poaching, whaling and appalling animal cruelty.

What on earth are we doing? I feel hopeless, but sign anyway. If we don't put the natural environment first, nothing will be right.

Yet we have to do far more than sit in a warm house basking in artificial light at our computers living a lifestyle that adds to the problems as we sign a box. I am as guilty as anyone.

In the rural environment, hedgehog numbers have fallen by 50-75 per cent while in urban areas, the drop is around 30 per cent.

If an omnivorous generalist such as the hedgehog is struggling, what does this mean for everything else?

For years I have followed the work of Hugh Warwick – Hedgehog Hugh. His latest petition is a brilliant campaign to lobby the government to bring in a law applicable to all developers and building companies.

It's a simple plan to ensure that in the rash of new housing schemes proposed countrywide, all fences between properties will have a 13cm (5 inch) square hedgehog-sized hole inbuilt.

This will allow hedgehogs to pass from one garden to the next on their foraging trips.

Hedgehogs have a home range of up to 30 hectares (74 acres) and may travel over 2km (1.2 miles) a night; they need to move freely and safely to find enough food and a mate. Increasingly they are restricted by barriers. It would cost less than 50p for each building company to

**Hedgehogs need an invertebrate-rich habitat**







Baby hedgehogs

*“If our ecosystem was healthy, then our wildlife would find its own balance”*

implement this vital lifeline. When I shared Hugh’s petition on my Facebook page, I was shocked and angered by the vitriolic response of an ill-informed friend. Social media can be perilous.

He suggested we remove every last badger from the British countryside, claiming badgers were “wicked, evil” creatures and it was solely due to these “vile” mustelids that hedgehog numbers had crashed. He suggested I start a petition to rid the country of badgers.

This argument has simmered for decades. Badgers are an integral part of our ecosystems just as much as hedgehogs. Most naturalists would agree we cannot choose one native species over another and simply wipe it out because it does not currently fit in. I want to set the record straight: if our ecosystem was healthy, then wildlife would find its own natural balance.

As humans, we are adept at passing the blame on to someone or something else. In environmental matters, seldom do we take a long, hard look at our own actions. What we are doing, and have done, is the problem.

Badgers, and on occasion skilled foxes, will indeed

prey on hedgehogs. I occasionally find dry, hollow skins of unfortunate hedgehogs that have served as a badger snack. Nature is harsh – but it’s ecological madness to contemplate wiping out badgers to conserve hedgehogs.

Don’t overlook the fact that the red squirrel, another mammal we adore, sometimes takes songbird chicks and eggs from unguarded nests, and a woodpecker drills out tit boxes to devour the young. It’s normal behaviour. Hedgehogs eat baby birds, too.

Badgers and hedgehogs have lived side by side for centuries. Why the terrifying decline now?

Hedgehogs, as their name suggests, rely heavily on species-rich hedgerows and connected native woodland. Intensive farming, forestry and development, plus an increased road network, and chemical sprays have led to a paucity of suitable habitat.

The badger lives underground, so is better protected in most cases. Like the hedgehog, it is an omnivore competing for a similar diet. In an invertebrate-depleted environment where there is not enough food to go around, the larger, more powerful animal will come >>

The Scottish SPCA's  
Sheelagh McAllister  
in the hoggerly



out on top. With little or no cover for hedgehogs to move around in safety, they become easy prey for an opportunist badger. When two species share a food source and there is not enough for both, one may prey upon the other. This is known as an asymmetric intraguild relationship and is common in nature. And let's not forget we need predators, just as we need prey.

I have taken in injured and orphaned hedgehogs since I was a child. Litters born late in the season are often too low in weight by the onset of winter and have not stored enough brown fat to survive hibernation in the wild.

In autumn, wildlife sanctuaries receive numerous such animals to overwinter. We have made a special hoggerly where we house these youngsters in a large, safe space.

Thickly bedded with dry leaves and leaf litter, hay and moss, once installed they instantly make their own nests. Ferrying their chosen bedding in their mouths, they tightly pack it into igloo-shaped hedgehog houses. Sometimes half a dozen snooze together. A surprising amount of heat is generated in these safe hibernacula. As night falls they re-emerge huffing and puffing, eating noisily. Some barge into one another, spines erect. They are enthralling.

Depending on the weather, our winter visitors are released early in spring. I liaise with the Scottish SPCA, taking some of their overwintered hedgehogs too.

Finding a suitable habitat is an increasing problem. It's not the worry about badgers, plentiful here in Highland

Perthshire, but the need for them to be far away from roads and in the richest areas of native woodland that are not marooned by monocultures and overgrazed deserts.

Whilst release is a high point, it also fills me with concern – every single hedgehog matters more than ever. As I watch their wonderfully eccentric forms trundling off into the undergrowth, I ask myself if they will make it.

Restoration ecology is the solution to the dearth of the hedgehog, as it is for every other living thing, including us. And it starts at the bottom with microscopic soil organisms. If the earth is unhealthy, overworked, and filled with chemicals, then little can survive.

This is not merely a black and white issue. We need to study the bigger picture, and a world without hedgehogs and badgers is unthinkable. 🐾

## FASCINATING FACTS

Hedgehogs inspired author Beatrix Potter to create one of her most famous characters, Mrs Tiggy-Winkle.

It is illegal to own a hedgehog as a pet in some US states, including Hawaii and California.

The average hedgehog has approximately 5000 quills on its body and will only replace 90% of them.