

# The Wildlife Information Centre

## The hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*)



**Size:** 150-300mm (tail 10-20mm), and up to 2kg in weight (heaviest in autumn)

**Appearance:** The hedgehog is an unmistakable small garden mammal with a body covered in sharp spines. The back and upper parts are covered in spines that can be bristled. The spines stick out in all directions and when alarmed the hedgehog will curl up in a ball for protection. The head, flanks and underparts are all covered in coarse brown hair. The ears are hairy and prominent, the snout is black, shiny and wet. The eyes are black.

**Food:** Beetles, worms, caterpillars, slugs and almost anything they can catch, but little plant material. They can also take eggs and chicks of ground-nesting birds though rarely in large numbers and much less so than foxes and crows.

**Distribution:** The hedgehog is common in parks, gardens and farmland throughout mainland Britain and Ireland. It has also been introduced to many islands including Orkney, Shetland, Isle of Man and some of the Channel Islands.

**Habitat:** Hedgehogs prefer woodland edges, hedgerows and suburban habitats where there is plenty of food for them. Intensively farmed arable land is probably a poor habitat, as are moorland and dense conifer forests.

**Hibernation:** Hibernation usually begins about November and ends around Easter, but is much affected by the weather. Hedgehogs normally wake up several times over winter and often build a new nest. In the spring they commonly spend a few days active then enter hibernation again during a cold snap. The winter nest ("hibernaculum") is made of leaves, tucked under a bush or log pile or garden shed, anywhere that offers support and protection.

**Threats:** The biggest threat to hedgehogs is probably habitat loss, with the change from pastoral farming to arable crops, over the last 30 years. The use of chemicals in gardens and for intensive farming kills the creatures hedgehogs need for food and may also poison them directly. Many are also killed on roads.

Gardens are hazardous – strimmers cut back rank vegetation in the very places hedgehogs lie up during the day, causing serious wounds to the sleeping animals. Hedgehogs hibernate under garden bonfire heaps which is also dangerous if bonfires are not turned over before being burnt. Hedgehogs may also drown in smooth-sided garden ponds, because although they swim well, they are unable to escape from these. Garden netting is also dangerous unless staked down tightly to avoid hedgehogs becoming entangled.

### References:

**The Mammal Society:** Mammals of the British Isles – Factsheets and Information  
[http://www.mammal.org.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=212&Itemid=245](http://www.mammal.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=212&Itemid=245)

**Morris, P (2006) The New Hedgehog Book.** Whittet Books, London

**Sterry, P (2010) Collins Complete British Animals.** Collins