

Help for hedgehogs *Hannah Stockwell*

As a gardener you may have noticed fewer of our slug eating friends, hedgehogs, around these days. Over the last decade, hedgehog populations have plummeted by a quarter and as they are declining in both rural and urban areas there is no easy answer as to why. Two wildlife charities, The People's Trust for Endangered Species and British Hedgehog Preservation Society have joined forces on a three year research project into the possible causes, and what can be done to help.

One likely factor affecting hedgehogs, along with a lot of other wildlife, is habitat loss and fragmentation. As the surrounding countryside becomes increasingly inhospitable for insectivores, our urban and suburban gardens and parks are becoming ever more important in providing a refuge for hedgehogs to survive. Wildlife-friendly gardens support an astonishing range of species. Natural England says that many creatures that are declining in the countryside, such as the common frog, song thrush and hedgehog, can thrive in domestic gardens and other areas if we provide the right conditions for them.

Although improving individual gardens is good for wildlife, many mammals are restricted by physical barriers and so populations can become isolated in these islands. No matter how ideal the habitat is, they need these areas to be linked up in order to move around. Hedgehogs

have large home ranges and travel up to one mile each night to look for food and to find mates, and so as part of the three year project, PTES and BHPS have launched 'Hedgehog Street'.



This nationwide campaign will help local communities, through volunteer Hedgehog Champions, to take small steps to improve not just their own gardens but their whole neighbourhood. The campaign advises Champions to work with their neighbours to create links between adjoining gardens, by planting hedges to replace solid boundaries or by simply cutting a small hole in the fence or removing a brick so that our busy garden friends can roam freely.

Other suggestions to improve your garden include leaving a messy unmown area for shelter, building a logpile to attract insects for the hedgehogs to eat, and avoiding the use of slug pellets to reduce risks of poisoning. If you are lucky enough to have a hedgehog visiting your garden already, then you can help by putting out some hedgehog food or dog food for them each night. In dry periods it is particularly important to provide food and water as their invertebrate prey such as worms and snails can be much harder to come by. It is also essential that you do not give them milk because it makes them sick.

Help your hedgehogs is by building or buying them a hedgehog box to nest in, and placing it in a quiet corner of your garden. Even if you have dogs or cats, they shouldn't cause too much trouble for your new resident as their sharp spines are a very good form of defence! Hedgehogs are renowned for having fleas, but don't worry as these are specially adapted for living on spiny mammals and will not transfer to humans or other mammals.

If you'd like to volunteer to become one of our **Hedgehog Champions**, you will receive a support pack filled with factsheets, posters and ways to engage your neighbours and will also have access to a website with information about hedgehogs plus a dedicated forum and gallery to discuss your ideas and experiences with others. For more information or to sign up for a pack, please visit **www.hedgehogstreet.org** and help make your street a Hedgehog Street.

Hannah Stockwell is Promotions Officer at The People's Trust for Endangered Species.