



Helping hedgehogs

The 'gardener's friend' is under threat, says Penny Bunting, and smallholders can give them a helping hand

Now that spring has arrived, you may be lucky enough to spot hedgehogs as they emerge from hibernation.

Hedgehogs are one of just three British mammals that truly hibernate.

Like dormice and bats, they sleep through the whole winter. The insects and beetles that form the bulk of their diet die out during cold weather, so hedgehogs need to eat their fill while they can. A sleeping hedgehog uses very little energy, so hibernating is a good survival strategy.

And, as smallholders, we should be doing all we can to help these creatures survive. Although once a common sight in gardens, parks and hedgerows, the chances of seeing a hedgehog are becoming few and far between.

Figures compiled earlier this year by the People's Trust for Endangered Species (www.ptes.org) reveal that hedgehog numbers are declining at an alarming rate. There are now fewer than a million hedgehogs in the UK – compare this with an estimated 36 million in the 1950s and it's easy to understand why conservationists are worried.

This decline is due to habitat loss, dwindling food sources and climate change. As winters become milder, the hibernation habits of hedgehogs, dormice and bats are disturbed, causing them to use up valuable energy reserves at a time of year when food

sources are scarce. Warmer temperatures also cause animals to emerge from hibernation earlier, disrupting breeding and feeding cycles.

One easy thing we can all do to give hedgehogs a helping hand is to take care if building a bonfire. That pile of sticks and leaves may just look like garden debris to us, but to a hedgehog it's five-star accommodation!

To ensure that you don't unwittingly incinerate a hedgehog when you have a bonfire, it's important to relocate the whole thing just before lighting. Leaving the bonfire-building until the last minute will also help to avoid harm.

But an even better idea is to give the bonfire a miss altogether. Instead, why not find a quiet corner of the smallholding to create a pile of brushings? These heaps of branches, twigs and other plant material provide a fantastic habitat for toads and invertebrates as well as hedgehogs.

A pile of leaves raked up and ready for composting will also be an appealing pad for a hedgehog, and hibernating amphibians are keen on this type of habitat, too. Compost heaps can also have all sorts of wildlife in residence, including slow worms.

Leaving piles of leaves alone until spring, and taking great care when turning over compost heaps, means animals can remain undisturbed.

And if you really want to help, you could go one step further and build a hedgehog house.

The simplest home can be made from a sturdy cardboard box, with air vents and an entrance hole cut in the sides. Put shredded newspaper or clean, dry straw inside, then position the box under a fence with some plastic sheeting over it to make it more weather-resistant. Finally, pile twigs, leaves and dry grass cuttings over the top. You can also make a more complex structure from wood: for instructions visit the British Hedgehog Preservation Society's website (www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk).

For more ideas on how to help hedgehogs, visit Hedgehog Street (www.hedgehogstreet.org), a nationwide initiative to encourage individuals and communities to create hedgehog-friendly spaces.

Gardeners who do create hedgehog havens will reap the benefits – known as "the gardener's friend", a hedgehog will eat all sorts of pests, including slugs, snails and caterpillars. So if you're lucky enough to have a hedgehog on your smallholding, do all you can to encourage it to stay!

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