



## ***Press Release***

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### **Neighbourhood watch scheme launched as wildlife charities challenge a prickly problem: the decline of UK hedgehogs**

Hedgehogs are instantly recognisable and much loved creatures. All the more distressing then that a new report (*The State of Britain's Hedgehogs*) provides definitive evidence that their numbers have declined by at least a quarter in the last 10 years – confirming their status as a conservation priority species. This alarming figure has compelled wildlife charities: the People's Trust for Endangered Species and the British Hedgehog Preservation Society to join forces to launch *Hedgehog Street*. This initiative aims to empower whole communities, encouraged by volunteer Hedgehog Champions, to take small steps to improve their neighbourhood for hedgehogs in a bid to create a giant patchwork of hedgehog-friendly areas across the British Isles.

As PTES Conservation Officer and campaign organiser Laura Bower explains: "Twenty-three million households have access to a garden in the UK covering around 433,000 hectares. Reaching a modest 0.1% of these could lead to the creation of a hedgehog refuge larger than the Sherwood Forest National Nature Reserve. We are looking for enthusiastic volunteers to become hedgehog champions in their local area. We will help them encourage their neighbours to take action for hedgehogs in their gardens or communal green spaces."

Last autumn PTES and BHPS enlisted the help of 15 volunteers as local champions to trial *Hedgehog Street* around the country. Since then, these first recruits have been encouraging their friends and neighbours to undertake simple conservation tasks such

as creating hedgehog houses, as well as keeping diaries, taking pictures and hosting events to see how best to spread the word and build community involvement. Having fine-tuned the logistics involved, the campaign is now set to be rolled out nationwide, but it needs plenty of people power if it is to truly make a difference.

### *Why are hedgehog numbers plummeting in the UK?*

The reasons for the decline in UK hedgehog numbers are complex, but are thought to be associated with the loss of hedgerows and permanent grasslands; the intensification of agriculture and larger field sizes; while the use of pesticide reduces the amount of prey available in the countryside. Also badgers are a natural predator of hedgehogs and they will actively avoid sites where badgers are present in large numbers, an increasing problem because there are fewer areas for hedgehogs to take refuge in. Urban and suburban areas are becoming increasingly important for hedgehogs, but the move towards tidy, sterile gardens has also contributed to their demise.

As Fay Vass, CEO of BHPS elaborates: “Gardens have become far too tidy in recent years, paved over for parking, or enclosed within impenetrable fences and walls. Hedgehogs typically travel about a mile each night in order to gather food and search for a mate, so they need the freedom to move between different areas. Artificial barriers such as solid fences and walls prevent movement around their home range. Furthermore, loss of natural habitat means there is nowhere for them to forage or hibernate. Relatively simple actions will ensure success for the survival of these increasingly threatened creatures.”

In the early part of the last century, hedgehogs were abundant throughout Britain, with an estimated population as high as perhaps 30 million in the 1950s. By 1995 it was estimated to be about 1.5 million (1.1 million in England, 0.31 million in Scotland and 0.145 million in Wales). The new report shows that recent surveys in urban and rural areas still indicate falling numbers of hedgehogs.

“Hedgehogs are also important because their presence indicates a healthy landscape with lots of ground-dwelling invertebrates and varied land habitat features, such as hedges and copses”, continues Laura Bower. “So the good news is that whatever we do to encourage hedgehogs will also benefit other wildlife species.”

### *How can people help?*

The short answer is by taking part in *Hedgehog Street* and generating a groundswell of support amongst the neighbours in your street, estate or communal grounds. Information packs about how to take part are available from the website [www.hedgehogstreet.org](http://www.hedgehogstreet.org) and these are crammed with ideas on making your own garden and neighbourhood more hedgehog-friendly.

The wider campaign is also underpinned by a programme of practical research projects, funded by PTES and BHPS over the next three years, to further scientific understanding about the causes for the decline in hedgehog numbers and most importantly what can be done to reverse this threat to this iconic species.

Additional support for *Hedgehog Street* has been provided by the BBC Wildlife Fund.

- ENDS -

### **MEDIA CONTACTS**

For further information, images to arrange interviews contact: Jane Bevan or Susannah Penn at Firebird PR on 01235 835297 / 07977 459547 or via email to [jb@firebirdpr.co.uk](mailto:jb@firebirdpr.co.uk)

### **NOTES TO EDITORS**

#### **Spiny natural history - facts about hedgehogs**

- The name hedgehog came into use around the year 1450, derived from the Middle English *heyghoge*, from *heyg* or *hegge* meaning hedge because they frequents hedgerows, and *hoge* or *hoggehog*, from its piglike snout. Other names include urchin, hedgepig and furze-pig.
- Hedgehogs have several thousand sharp spines on their backs – 5,000 to 6,500 spines on the average hedgehog, which are hard on the outside, while being filled with air pockets on the inside and used to protect against predators.
- They are not shy of sharing our built environment, making use of short grass, compost heaps and flower beds in gardens and recreational areas feeding on earthworms, beetles, slugs and caterpillars. In rural areas, they live along woodland edges and hedgerows in meadowland and rough pasture, almost anywhere where there is sufficient cover for nesting, but they are scarce or absent in marshy or upland habitats (such as moorland) and in coniferous woodland.
- The presence of hedgehogs is a good indicator of plentiful ground-dwelling invertebrates and of varied habitat features, such as hedges and copses.
- Between November and the end of March, when food is scarce, hedgehogs hibernate to

conserve energy, remaining largely inactive. During the rest of the year, they are mostly nocturnal, travelling 1-2km in a night over home ranges of 10-50 ha in search of food and mates. The highest numbers are found in suburban areas where badgers are absent, when there might be up to 80 individuals in a square kilometre.

- Hedgehogs are widespread but patchily distributed in Great Britain and Ireland, where they are found up to the treeline. They are absent from some of the Scottish islands including Barra, Jura, Colonsay, Eigg and Rum in the Hebrides, and Rousay in Orkney.

***A detailed fact sheet about hedgehogs is available on request***

- Interviews can be arranged with:
  - Laura Bower, Conservation Officer, PTES
  - Jill Nelson, CEO, PTES
  - Fay Vass, CEO, BHPS
  - Hugh Warwick, Communications Officer, BHPS
  - Dr Pat Morris, academic, hedgehog expert & BHPS President
- Hedgehog sightings are recorded through several annual wildlife surveys and an independent study (*The State of Britain's' Hedgehogs*) was commissioned from the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) in September 2010 to compare the results of data gathered from these surveys over the last 15 years. This review has allowed PTES and BHPS to establish clear scientific evidence of the decline in hedgehog populations across the UK.

Surveys recording hedgehogs in the UK included in the study:

*Mammals on Roads* and *Living with Mammals* (People's Trust for Endangered Species)

*Breeding Bird Survey*, *Waterways Breeding Bird Survey* and *Garden BirdWatch* began collecting mammal data in the 1990s (British Trust for Ornithology)

*HogWatch* (British Hedgehog Preservation Society and People's Trust for Endangered Species)

- A paper published in the Journal of Zoology in July 2006 demonstrates badgers and hogs cannot co-exist where the former exceed a certain number (in the region of 13 badgers per 10sq km). This density already exists in many areas of the UK, so hedgehogs are now threatened in many areas and this emphasises the importance of encouraging hedgehogs in urban gardens where they may be safer than in the countryside as badgers are less common in garden areas.

**About PTES** - [www.ptes.org](http://www.ptes.org)

PTES is a UK conservation charity created in 1977 to ensure a future for endangered species throughout the world. Working to protect some of our most threatened wildlife species and habitats, it provides practical conservation support through research, grant-aid and educational programmes, including wildlife surveys, publications and public events

**About BHPS** - [www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk](http://www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk)

BHPS is a UK charity founded in 1982 dedicated to helping & protecting hedgehogs native to the UK. They run a helpline offering advice on caring for & encouraging hedgehogs in the wild and in gardens. They aim to educate the public on how best to help hedgehogs and fund research into the behavioural habits of hedgehogs to ascertain the best methods of assisting their survival.