

## HEDGEHOGS IN A SMALL WEST NORFOLK GARDEN

I live in the village of Middleton in West Norfolk, in a house with a small garden of 476 square metres, densely planted with species chosen for wildlife benefit, with soil improved by compost and manure, carrying a good number of earthworms and beetles. The back garden in which the hedgehogs carry out their nightly activities is 275 square metres. On all sides are similar small gardens, and some of the adjoining properties abut farmland.

In 2009 I became aware that we had a regular visits from (I thought) one hedgehog, and I put out at the back door a plate of sunflower hearts, suet pellets, Spike hedgehog food and bits of fruit such as banana and raisins. Cat or dog food which is used by the nearby East Winch RSPCA Wildlife Hospital has never been provided because of domestic cat nuisance. Hedgehogs love bananas – I'm not quite sure why as they would not normally encounter such fruit. Sultanas and bananas are the very first food taken by early arrivals, and the sunflower hearts and suet pellets preferred to Spike. Fresh water is put out daily in several places, and frequently utilised after feeding. I have occasionally seen a house mouse at the dishes, but mercifully no rats. In these early days, the food disappeared, so I kept watch after dark from the utility room glassed on three sides, and was delighted to find a few individual hedgehogs coming and going, and eating enthusiastically for up to ten minutes. It became apparent from the size differences that there could be 3 or 4 animals, but investigating the interesting noises made by hedgehogs one evening, I found two couples circling each other and another at a food dish, and I realised we had more animals than originally thought. I contacted Dr Pat Morris, author of *The New Hedgehog Book* (British Natural History Series 2006) who has studied hedgehogs for decades, for some guidance which he generously provided, and he in turn put me in contact with a hogwatcher conducting a similar study in Bedfordshire.

In the spring of 2010 I started marking them with non-toxic white artists' fluorescent acrylic in various combinations of dots and lines and crosses. The first series was yellow, then white, then pink, then green, and now I have to use a combination of two colours. By the end of October 2010, to my astonishment, 53 different animals were painted and identifiable. All except one were re-recorded regularly – No. 17 was marked and seen only once more, and was presumably transitory. To the best of my knowledge none nests on the property since an old garage was demolished in the spring, behind which hedgehog (No. 1) was found curled up in a nest under an old piece of linoleum. Hedgehog No. 11 obviously lived in thick hedge and overgrown vegetation next door, since it was the first to arrive every evening, and occasionally before dark, accessing this garden from next door under the wooden fence. It was territorial and very aggressive to other hogs, pushing and banging them so determinedly that they frequently curled up in a ball and were rolled around. To try and cut down the stress of these and other interactions, four plates are put down in different areas still visible from the window and this has certainly had the effect of minimising inter-personal aggression. Having been the first and most regular to arrive for many months, No. 11 was last seen on 22 July, 2010 and then never again, and was presumably killed. The animals are handled quietly and carefully, and it is encouraging that they are frequently the first back for food the following evening, and presumably not too traumatised by catching and marking. They are endearing, rather grumpy-looking animals which lead almost entirely solitary lives. How do so many find the food, which has very little smell? Do they simply follow the scent of other hedgehogs?

I have found sexing the animals is not always easy as some curl up tighter than others. They are weighed each time they have to be handled, (usually for repainting) as the identification marks get dirty or wear off. The smallest in 2010 weighed 150g, and the largest Big Daddy weighed in at 1340g!

Small openings as little as 10-12 cm. allowing access between garden fences are apparently critically important to hedgehog success.

Autumn juveniles – late or second births – present the conservationist with a problem. Young hedgehogs weighing under 450g do not have sufficient energy reserves to hibernate over the winter, and will simply not wake up. Fortunately our RSPCA East Winch Wildlife Hospital is brilliant with young hedgehogs, and will take in underweight and sick animals with a view to

releasing them when they attain the correct weight and good health. They are kept in conditions warm enough to keep them feeding and prevent hibernation until they are big enough or well enough to be released. If you find a very small hedgehog in the late autumn (end of October and November) or a hedgehog out in daylight at any time, please take it to them – it is in trouble. (A donation covering the cost of feeding your hedgehog, plus perhaps a contribution to feeding other young hedgehogs would be most welcome by them).

The last hedgehog of 2010 was seen on 25 November, and the first of 2011 was seen on 17 March. About a quarter of the animals marked in 2010 have been seen in 2011. Either the severe winter killed a fair number, or perhaps many of last year's population have simply moved elsewhere. Pat Morris's radio tracking experiments showed the total area of a male hedgehog's home area can be 20-30 hectares, and about 10 hectares for females, and they travel about 2-3 kilometres each night. For the first time this year I have seen a mother with her baby, and to date have marked a total of 68 hedgehogs.

I hope to run this survey for at least five years to establish better population data on a diminishing species. It would be interesting and valuable if a few more people could run something similar in other Norfolk localities. More data are badly needed for our area.

The study is not without small tragedies. A friend came round in October to say there was a large dead hedgehog with paint spots on the pavement outside his house. I was very sad to find No. 39, a large female hedgehog weighing 934g and in perfect condition to go into hibernation. She had not been run over by a car – she had been stamped on. I have very few large females in my survey which made it even sadder. On a happier note, new dog Dillon found No. 67 – an autumn juvenile – in the garden the next day.

Hedgehogs have, of course, been added to the Biodiversity Action Plan List, and are believed to be diminishing particularly on the eastern side of the country. The new initiative by the People's Trust for Endangered Species called "Hedgehog Street" - <http://www.hedgehogstreet.org/> - is very worthy of support, and gives good information, as does the internet site for The British Hedgehog Protection Society - [www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk](http://www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk).