

## SPECIES ON THE BRINK

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## Hedgehog numbers are decreasing at an alarming rate in the UK – but you can help save them

### Are hedgehogs becoming scarce in Britain?

Yes. They are difficult to count but, in the 1950s, there were estimated to be 30 million hedgehogs in Britain. The most recent estimate, by The Mammal Society in 2018, put the population at 879,000.

### Are they going to become extinct?

They are classified as Vulnerable to Extinction on the IUCN Red List for British Mammals, which indicates a high risk of extinction in the wild. The population continues to decline, particularly in rural areas, and a 2018 study found, shockingly, that they were absent from 79 per cent of the rural sites surveyed in England and Wales.

### Are they doing better in urban areas?

Urban hedgehogs appear to be doing relatively well in gardens, recreational grassland and other green spaces. Their population has declined by 30 per cent since 2000 (compared with a 50 per cent decline in rural areas) but it now seems to be stable and might even be recovering. It's good news – but it's starting from a frighteningly low baseline. Roughly a quarter of all British hedgehogs (200,000–250,000) now live in urban areas.

### Aren't hedgehogs protected?

Yes, to a degree. They have some protection under Schedule 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981), which makes it illegal to kill or capture wild hedgehogs using certain methods, such as trapping and snaring. They are also protected under the Wild Mammals Protection Act (1996), which prohibits cruelty and mistreatment of them. Unfortunately, though, none of this legislation addresses the real drivers behind hedgehog decline.

### Why are numbers declining?

The biggest problem is road casualties: it's estimated that as many as 335,000



hedgehogs die on the UK's roads every year. Road mortality is highest in suburban areas and villages and peaks in the summer months when they are most active. But there are three other major threats: habitat loss, caused by urban development and hedgerow removal; habitat fragmentation, due to roads and impassable fences, walls and other barriers that limit movements and isolate hedgehog populations (smaller populations can become unviable and locally extinct); and increased use of pesticides and fertilizers that can poison the hedgehogs and reduce the diversity and abundance of their invertebrate prey. Another, unquantified, threat is garden injuries from strimmers, lawnmowers, netting, bonfires and dog bites. Climate-induced changes to invertebrate prey availability or hibernation timings may also have a negative impact, though we don't know for sure.

### Aren't badgers eating them all?

No, it is a myth that badgers are to blame for hedgehog declines. But the two species do have a complex relationship. They tend to eat the same prey, so there is some competition for food. Badgers do occasionally eat hedgehogs, particularly when their normal food is scarce during summer droughts, but this appears to have smaller, local impacts at most. On the other hand, there are several

studies that show badgers and hedgehogs living 'happily' alongside each other: after all, they have co-existed for thousands of years. Meanwhile, the removal of entire populations of badgers from large swathes of England in recent years seems to have had no impact on hedgehog numbers.

### What's happening in the rest of their range?

Western European hedgehogs have declined throughout much of their range (by 16–51 per cent during a recent 10-year period, depending on the country). But, ironically, while we're fighting to save our populations, conservationists in New Zealand are trying to get rid of them to protect their native ground-nesting birds. The difference, of course, is that hedgehogs are native to Western Europe but 'accidental tourists' in New Zealand, shipped out to remind homesick settlers of home.

### What can we do to help?

There is a lot you can do: link your garden with those of your neighbours by making hedgehog-sized holes in fences and walls; provide homes for them to hibernate in; put out food and water; stop using chemicals and slug pellets; check before strimming or starting bonfires; and leave some wilder foraging areas in your garden. Hedgehogs have been voted the UK's favourite mammal many times, so it's surprising we are not doing more to protect them. **W**

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