

# All about Hedgehogs

## Hedgehog facts

- 1 The hedgehog is a member of the Order Insectivora.
- 2 The insectivores are mainly small ground-dwelling mammals that feed upon invertebrates.
- 3 The hedgehog is the most easily recognised of Irish mammals.
- 4 Its body is covered with up to seven thousand protective spines, which it can raise in defence.
- 5 It has small eyes and ears and a snout that is pointed and relatively mobile.
- 6 Their teeth, like most insectivores, are sharp, for piercing and crushing hard bodied prey.
- 7 It is not clear when and how the hedgehog reached Ireland but the earliest record is from the mid 13th century in Waterford city.

## What do they feed on?

Hedgehogs will eat almost any invertebrate, but they will also take eggs, small mammals and carrion. There is no detailed information on the composition of the diet in Ireland but a study in Britain indicated that about half the diet consists of beetles and caterpillars.



## How many young do they have?

- Females have litters of 4-5 young (sometimes more) between April and September.
- The young are born in a large maternity nest and at first are blind and pink, but soon sprout soft white spines.
- Their eyes open at about 14 days and they are weaned after about five weeks.
- They disperse from the nest about this time and Males do not assist in rearing them, and young born late often die, because they have not built up enough fat reserves to survive hibernation.



## Where do they live?

Hedgehogs prefer deciduous woodland habitats, but can also be found in hedgerows, fields, parks, railway embankments, town and country gardens. During spring and summer days they sleep in temporary nests and wake up at dusk to venture out and hunt for food.

The hedgehogs food is in short supply during the winter, so it spends the coldest months hibernating in a specially prepared nest. Hibernation usually lasts from November until March. During this time the body temperature drops to that of its surroundings and breathing almost stops.



## How can I help hedgehogs?

The best ways of assisting hedgehogs are by helping them avoid man-made hazards and providing them with suitable places to nest, especially in the winter. Garden rubbish frequently provides a home for hedgehogs and should be carefully turned over before burning.

The use of garden chemicals such as insecticides and slug pellets should be avoided and alternative methods of control should be considered, eg 'beer traps' (small containers of beer sunk in ground) can be very effective.

If you do want to provide some additional feeding for hedgehogs in your garden it is probably best not to give milk and bread as these can cause internal problems. Instead you could consider providing things like minced meat, chopped unsalted peanuts, boiled eggs, or chicken (cooked or uncooked). They are also partial to mealworms!