

FEATURES

LIFE OF A CITY HEDGEHOG

Let's all assist our city hogs!

THE HEDGEHOG brings a dash of exciting wildness into our tamed modern lives. It is a wonder they tolerate the maladjusted city lifestyle we have forced upon them here in South Bristol.

I shouldn't assign human characteristics to animals, but I find something endearingly polite and resolute about their nature. Our prickly friends carry on steadfastly, tolerant of us regardless of how much we have messed up it all up. They potter about quietly in our gardens and parks, putting up with all the lousy weather and rubbish. And then, when things turn miserable in late autumn or winter, they just retreat into hibernation.

They are remarkable urban adapters, now doing far better in built-up areas than in the farmed countryside, according to research – although hedgehog numbers have crashed by one third since 2001 even in towns and cities, says the People's Trust for Endangered Species.

Our city populations are vital for the species' conservation. We know these elusive nocturnal mammals are still familiar garden visitors, because residents took part in a survey and campaign I ran with Avon Wildlife Trust and the Voice a while ago.

These intrepid wanderers can cover up to 2km in a night, in their search for food, a mate, or, right now, a nesting site. But with each adventure, they risk crashing into conflict.

Yvonne Cox, at Bristol's Hedgehog Rescue charity, sees the casualties in her emergency room, stacked floor to ceiling with dozens of rehab cages. Her tales of a multitude of hog hazards make you amazed there are any of these animals left.

"Zoflora was found stuck in a drain and covered in disinfectant and bleach," recalls Yvonne. (Yes, this hog has been named after a cleaning product.) "The finder thought she was a rat. After treatment for shock, worming, feeding and rest, she was released where found – after the

Voice naturalist Alex Morss writes on the perils of being a modern urban hedgehog in South Bristol, and how we can all do our bit to help them thrive ...

Right, a patient at Bristol Hedgehog Rescue – one of a record 336 treated last year

PHOTO: Yvonne Cox



drain cover had been replaced."

She continues: "Thomas and James were found trapped in an inspection pit at the steam railway at Bitton, totally black with oil and soot. They received many baths and after monitoring for poisoning and further treatment, they were released nearby to a lovely garden."

Then there was Clanger, who lost his spikes: "Found in a barn

without a mother. Named after he contracted ringworm and began to resemble the characters in the TV programme." Clanger is eating well but needs plenty of baths – "which make him very grumpy!"

Yvonne said 2018 was a record year for her charity, with 336 hogs treated. "The mild weather meant few hibernations and winter hog activity continued regardless of depleted food. This

resulted in admissions continuing to January and beyond."

Yvonne, who is also known by many for the talks she gives to schools and groups, previously entrusted me with nursing a female hedgehog with a broken leg. She'd had a painful run-in with a rat trap on an allotment – not uncommon, sadly.

I also helped two brothers who had been found orphaned after their mother had eaten slug pellets. I was smitten by their cuteness, from the ends of their chocolate button noses and snuffling snouts to the tips of all 6,000 spines. The pair recovered to roam South Bristol once again.

Many hedgehogs are found dehydrated or underweight each year due to drought or unseasonal weather. The British Hedgehog Preservation Society says threats are habitat loss, roads, climate change and pesticides, but also bonfires and litter – and open water, if they can't find a way out. They are eaten by badgers and foxes too.

City hedgehogs need lots of gardens to explore, to find sufficient slugs, snails, earthworms, beetles, caterpillars, millipedes, earwigs and fruit. That's why it's so helpful if we can make sure there are holes in our garden walls and fences so they can move around easily.

May is the start of breeding time. The female will be looking for nesting sites now. Perhaps your garden could be that place? She will be pregnant for up to five weeks from May to July, and then typically nurse 4-6 young for up to six weeks. They will be able to roll into a ball by 11 weeks – but their protective prickles will take longer to harden.

Their ancient defences seem so far removed from the new challenges of modern life. How lucky we are to have these charming and secretive night spirits creeping among us.

10 TOP WAYS TO HELP HEDGEHOGS

1. **Make a Hedgehog Highway – a brick-sized hole, 13cm x 13cm, in a garden wall or fence to give them garden access.**
2. **Be cautious with strimmers, netting, wood preservatives, bonfires, inescapable ponds, open drains, garden forks, dogs, and trapping hedgehogs inside sheds.**
3. **Avoid using pesticides or rodent traps.**
4. **Leave wild areas with long grass, compost, logs, leaves and water.**

5. **Offer meaty (not fishy) cat or dog food – not milk or bread.**
6. **Plot sightings on the national Hedgehog Street Map at bighedgehogmap.org**
7. **Volunteer or donate to Hedgehog Rescue to help Yvonne support hedgehogs at hedgehogrescue.webplus.net**
8. **Call the hog hotline 01584 890 801 if you see a hedgehog in distress.**
9. **Make a nesting or hibernating area. More advice on britishhedgehogs.org.uk**
10. **Urge neighbours to help create a network of accessible gardens.**

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