



Farming with Hedgehogs

Hedgehog decline is steepest in rural areas, with up to 50% lost from our British countryside since the Millennium. As a **mesopredator** and key indicator of a healthy rural ecosystem, this is a serious concern. Hedgehogs appear to be increasingly avoiding arable farmland and populations are becoming isolated in and around villages, which are acting as **refuge habitat**.



Changes in farming practices have proven problematic for hedgehogs, with intensive monoculture, heavy chemical use, and ploughing all reducing their main invertebrate food supply. The removal of hedgerows and reduction in field boundaries have taken away food, shelter and cover. Poorly lit, high speed roads associated with higher roadkill are also more prevalent in rural areas and road density is further increasing.

What about badgers?

Despite badgers being both a predator of hedgehogs and competing for food, they are unlikely to be the principal driver of hedgehog decline since hedgehogs are also declining in rural areas with low badger densities (e.g. East Anglia). Indeed, a recent study (Williams et al. 2018) found that neither hedgehogs nor badger setts were present in a quarter of over 250 rural sites across England and Wales, suggesting that parts of our rural landscape are not suitable for either species. We should be focussing our efforts on restoring and improving rural habitat for both. For more information on their complex relationship, read our **Badgers and Hedgehogs** guide.



Countryside Stewardship:

Land managers can be given financial incentives through Countryside Stewardship to manage their land for wildlife. For more detailed information and how the guidance here can relate to specific stewardship options, see the **Helping hedgehogs on your land** leaflet produced by the PTES and BHPS: <https://www.hedgehogstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Farmers-leaflet.pdf>.

Hedgerows:

'Hedge' hogs use hedges as a food source, to nest amongst, as shelter and to navigate through the landscape. Hedgerows need to be maintained and restored. Ideally they should be densely planted with no gaps and a good bramble understorey to provide structure for nesting. The base should be more than 2m wide, the height more than 3m tall, and the hedge cut in winter on a three-year rotation, with one side or the top cut each year. Hedges can also be layed after some time to encourage new bushy growth.



© Deborah Wright 2019

Field margins:

Margins are mostly where hedgehogs forage in arable land, and they may use them to nest amongst, particularly in the summer. Maintain margins at least 2m wide from hedges and cut them every 5 years to reduce shrub encroachment, with areas cut on rotation to avoid complete habitat loss. Larger margins of up to 6m metres are suggested for pastoral land. Margins and beetle banks act as movement corridors and also encourage invertebrates that reduce crop pests.

Field size and use:

Reduced field size with added hedgerows, field margins and beetle banks increases edge habitat, where hedgehogs choose to move around more safely. Having mixed arable and pastoral land improves invertebrate diversity.

Ploughing:

Reduce tillage to improve soil, reduce soil compaction and increase earthworms.

Scrub:

Retain areas of scrub, bramble, fallen trees/logs and decaying vegetation to provide nesting sites and shelter. Keep leaf litter for hedgehogs to collect as a nesting material.

Chemical use:

Reduced chemical use increases invertebrate availability and diversity. It can also avoid toxicity levels increasing at higher trophic levels. Rodenticides do not break down once the animal has died and can lead to secondary poisoning.



© Ceri Thomas 2019