

FEEDING Hedgehogs

INTRODUCTION

Feeding and sleeping areas must be separate. This is to avoid disturbing a sleeping hog when replenishing food and water. Other predators or hogs may also use the food or water, which again will disturb a sleeping hedgehog.

A disturbed nesting female (noise of opening boxes, human smells, other hedgehogs) is likely to abandon or even kill her hoglets, so it is important to **leave sleeping hedgehogs alone**.

Food should be kitten biscuits (not treats such as *Dreamies*) or meaty cat/dog food in clean dishes. Always provide plenty of fresh clean water in clean shallow dishes every day.

A dish of dry kitten food is perfect food for hedgehogs. It's complete, balanced nourishment; nothing needs adding. The first ingredient listed should be some kind of meat, not cereal which is worthless bulk.



It's easily available at your supermarket and is safe, regulated food at a fair price. It can be fed to hedgehogs of all ages and all through the year, as it won't freeze in winter or dry up in summer.

Put out before dusk and in the morning throw out any uneaten food, as it may have been contaminated by slugs, who carry lungworm.

Clean fresh water is a life saver for nocturnal animals and a shallow heavy dish like a flowerpot saucer is ideal.

Meaty food can be in jelly or gravy and fish flavours are fine (see the diagram below on *Fish Flavours*), they just might not enjoy it as much. Beware, flies in summer are problematic for meaty food and in winter this will freeze so biscuits are preferable (and the biscuits are good for their teeth). Check biscuits to ensure no milk in the ingredients.

FISH FLAVOURED FOOD

The three most common myths busted:

"But fish upsets their stomachs".

There are lots of reasons why a hedgehog gets a runny tummy - almost all of them are because the hedgehog is sick, not because they ate fish. If that were so, every hedgehog in the country would have a runny tummy because ANY flavour cat or dog food, from most brands, will contain some kind of fish.

"But it's not natural for hedgehogs to eat fish".

(This one always makes my jaw drop). I don't know why people think this - and yet think that a hedgehog eating a cow, a chicken, or a pig, is natural. You can't replicate a hedgehog's natural diet, and there's no need to try. What you're doing is supplementing their natural diet with an excellent and balanced source of protein.

"The advice everywhere always says 'a meaty' cat food, and fish isn't meat".

Yes it is. Meat is the flesh of an animal. A fish is an animal. I have absolutely no idea why some sites prefix 'cat food' with 'meaty'. All cat food is meaty.

Kitten biscuits are cheap, e.g. Tesco are £2.20 per kg and readily available. 'Specialist' hedgehog food can contain peanuts, sunflower hearts and mealworms – **ALL** of which are bad for them, contributing to the fatal metabolic bone disease (see below). Fruit in some will cause tooth decay and they are not able to digest these materials. These foods are also much more expensive per Kg than kitten biscuits!

To prevent local cats or wildlife eating the food before your prickly visitor arrives, you can make a simple feeding station. The water dishes outside the entrance will stop a cat getting in - see **1. Cat Proof Feeding Station** below.

Make food and water **available 365 days of the year** as some hedgehogs do not hibernate all through, and some will wake regularly to move nests which consumes a lot of energy. Safe food is therefore required and their natural food sources in winter are scarce - see **2. Hedgehog Diet**. They are forced to then eat slugs or snails which carry lungworm, then die of lungworm rather than starvation – see **3. Lungworm and other diseases**. There is also further information on **4. Mealworms and bird food** about the dangers of these to hedgehogs.

There is a 'Yes' and 'No' list further on for food – see **5. Feeding Guide** – please note that shop bought insects is on the 'No' list. This **INCLUDES** Calci worms as these can cause impaction issues and there's not enough evidence to say these are safe to feed in large quantities (some rescues may provide these but in a controlled way).

How Much Food to Provide?

Provide enough biscuits so that there are a few left over with tell-tale crumbs!

If the dish is completely clear with no crumbs – it is likely a cat or other animal has eaten the food – A feeding station is required. Hedgehogs leave crumbs after they've been. Here's an example – the dish was completely full and a good 3 adults used it.

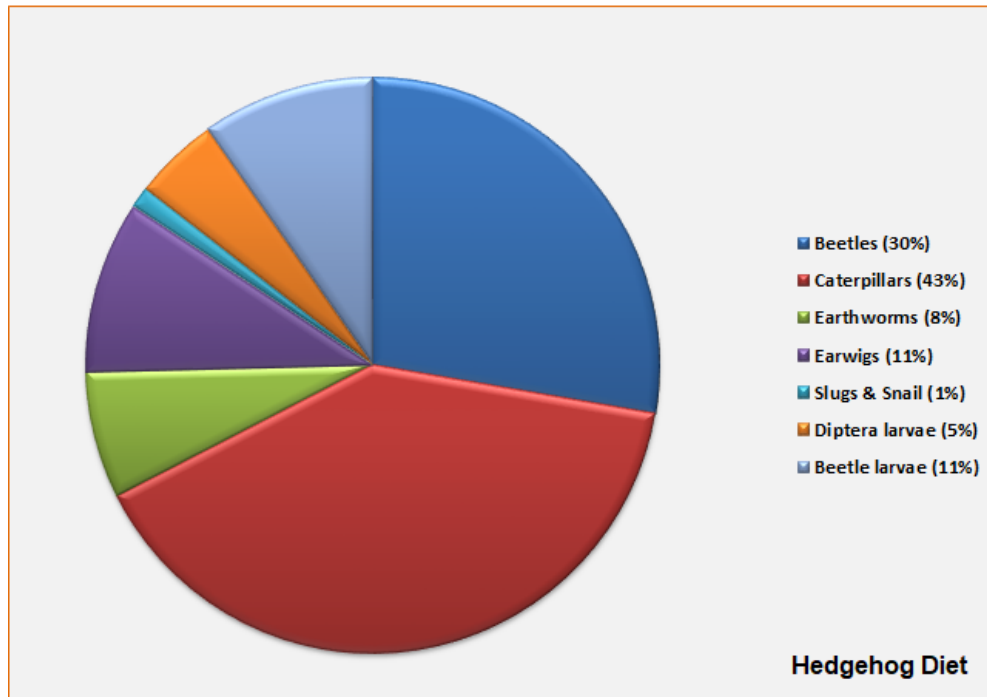


1. CAT PROOF FEEDING STATION



A simple feeding station can be made from an old plastic crate. Cut a 13cm x 13cm hold and tape around the sharp edges. Try to create a narrow tunnel entrance leading up to the crate to avoid cats getting in, and put something heavy on the top of the crate such as a brick, to make sure it doesn't blow away in windy weather.

2. HEDGEHOG DIET



3. LUNGWORM AND OTHER DISEASES

WHY HEDGEHOGS DIE OF LUNGWORM

A lot of people, when hearing ecologists talking about how we must save the insects and do more to help them, think: "Yeah, I know that's important, but I don't really care about bugs and creepy crawlies so much - what I really care about and love is animals." And these are nice, kind, compassionate people.

But what they don't realise is that animals, like the hedgehog, are dying of starvation because we're not caring enough about the insects.

The majority of a hedgehog's diet is caterpillars and beetles. Moths and butterflies need food and cover to lay their eggs, which turn into caterpillars, which also need to eat. So when you cut down long grasses, wild flowers, 'weeds', ivy and stinging nettles, or moan that the council hasn't cut back the undergrowth beside a path or around a recreation ground, or mown the grass neatly in the park, you are destroying the habitat and food for the caterpillars. The same goes for beetles and their larvae.

If the caterpillars and beetles have no food and die, it means there's nothing for hedgehogs to eat.

Hedgehogs don't eat slugs and snails, which is just as well as they carry parasites like lungworm and fluke (which are fatal if not treated). But if there are no caterpillars and beetles, and a hedgehog is starving and has no other source of food, they will be forced to eat anything - and slugs are always around. It's a desperate, short term solution, because instead of dying of starvation they will die of parasite invasion.

A whole generation has grown up thinking that any grass, anywhere, that's not cut and looking like a lawn, is somehow neglected and untidy. In our arrogance we've decided that plants that are no use to us, or aren't attractive, are 'weeds' and we must kill them, control them. We didn't give a thought that some other little lives depend on these plants.

So please leave a bit of your garden to nature. And ask your council to stop mowing and cutting back unnecessarily. Start putting lives over looks.

What to feed your garden hedgehogs: preventing Metabolic Bone Disease

For every milligram of phosphorus a mammal (including humans) consumes, a milligram of calcium must also be consumed. If it is not then the calcium gets taken from the bones in order to balance out the phosphorus, making the bones weak, painful and easily broken. We all realise the importance of having a 'balanced diet' ourselves, but somehow this common sense isn't considered when it comes to feeding hedgehogs. The healthy ratio of calcium to phosphorus is 1:1

Some foods are so low in calcium and so high in phosphorus that they should NEVER be given to hedgehogs, such as:

☒ Mealworms 1:20

☒ Sunflower hearts 1:7

☒ Peanuts 1:6

☒ Oats 1:6



There are many unscrupulous companies keen to cash in on the growing army of kind people trying to halt the hedgehog's decline, and will happily sell little more than floor sweepings of the cheapest, most unsuitable products, all wrapped up with a nice picture of a cute hedgehog, at the highest possible price. They are quite at liberty to do this as there are no regulations regarding wild animal food. I have even seen 'hedgehog food' made up entirely of the above listed items, sold by quite reputable companies to entirely unsuspecting and trusting hedgehog lovers. Some even boast they are 'recommended by rescues' (they aren't). Fed nightly these will cripple the hedgehogs, particularly the babies, who will then die in their nests of starvation, in agonising pain. You won't see this, all you'll notice is that not so many hogs are visiting your feeders.

When feeding any animal it's so important to pay attention to the latest research. Just because you've always done something doesn't mean it's right – if that were true we'd still be killing hedgehogs by feeding them bread and milk. Feeding hedgehogs these phosphorus-rich bird food ingredients, particularly mealworms, not only causes MBD but it can increase inflammation and cause tissue atrophy and calcification of the blood vessels. And that's to a healthy hedgehog – imagine how it would intensify the distress of an already compromised sick hedgehog.



Providing hedgehogs with food in your garden is supplementing their natural diet, not replacing it. It is impossible to replicate a hog's natural diet, and quite unnecessary to try, so don't get fooled by the 'natural' tray of dried bugs offered. All that is needed is balanced, nutritious food.




Good quality kitten or cat/dog food is nutritious and will provide complete balanced diet. Pet food is regulated, so you can be sure it is hygienically produced and contains no harmful ingredients. Dry cat food is good for dental health, as the crunch helps clean the teeth. Alternatively, wet cat or dog food can be fed. Please always ensure that a shallow dish of clean water is available.

Clear away any leftovers in the morning and clean the feeding area well, as slugs and snails will have been on the food and can be carriers of lungworm (fatal to hedgehogs if untreated).

4. MEALWORMS AND BIRD FOOD

NO MEALWORMS FOR HEDGEHOGS



"But the hedgehogs in my garden love mealworms! So why not?"

We know how much hedgehogs love mealworms - but just because an animal loves something doesn't make it good for them.


Mealworms have a very high phosphorus to calcium ratio - around 20:1. When mammals eat foods that contain phosphorus, the same amount of calcium is needed by the body to process it. If that isn't available from diet, **calcium is leached from the animal's bones** to counteract the imbalance.

When their diets frequently contain a higher phosphorus to calcium ratio, hedgehogs bones become weaker and weaker until they become broken, misshapen and bent - this is called **Metabolic Bone Disease (MBD)** and it is **incredibly painful**. In advanced cases there is nothing we can do for the poor hedgehog except putting it to sleep. MBD is dangerous to all hedgehogs but particularly damaging to juveniles who rarely make it to adulthood.

On top of this hedgehogs do love mealworm - but this means the hoggies will ignore other food and pick out the mealworms. Dried mealworms have **negligible calorific content** meaning they will also struggle to gain weight.

Even if we put out just a few - **hedgehogs travel up to 2km a night**. We have no idea what else is being fed to them, or left behind by birds.

It is better to be safe than sorry - so please do not feed mealworms to hedgehogs.




Hagrid

Please feed us cat food (biscuits/kibble or wet food), small dog biscuits or dog food. Alternatively, specific hedgehog food is available but please check it does not contain mealworms, peanuts, sunflower hearts or similar.

Please also leave us some shallow dishes of water around your garden. Thank you!

Peanuts, sunflower hearts, oats, raw meat (particularly chicken and beef 'chuck') and offal also have very high phosphorus to calcium ratios - please do not put them out for Hedgehogs and avoid premixed foods containing them.

Raisins also lead to tooth decay, and bread and milk are very bad for their little tummies.



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BIRD FOOD IS HARMFUL TO HEDGEHOGS

Metabolic Bone Disease in hedgehogs is a crippling, agonising condition that eventually kills. It is caused by eating foods that are too high in phosphorus and too low in calcium. **The worst foods are mealworms, sunflower hearts, peanuts and oats.**

Eating these foods forces the hedgehog's body to make up for the lack of calcium by taking it from the bones. The bones then become weak, thin, and very painful. Despite this agony the hedgehog's survival instincts will force him to keep moving, trying to find food and water. Eventually the leg bones break, the soft tissues swell, and the pain becomes unbearable. The hedgehog will no longer be able to leave the nest and will die there of starvation.

Hedgehogs would never naturally find these foods, they are supplied by humans, either directly, or by leaving leftovers under the bird feeders. Please ensure the hedgehogs visiting your garden never have access to these harmful foods by sweeping up fallen food from beneath your bird feeders, before dusk each evening.

You won't be able to see the damage you are causing - you'll just notice that not so many hedgehogs visit you anymore.



Hedgehogs should ONLY be fed cat or dog food

6. DIET AT A GLANCE

Print out the useful guide below from *Bertie's Wildlife Rescue* for feeding hedgehogs and keep it handy for reference.

BERTIE'S WILDLIFE RESCUE'S GUIDE TO FEEDING WILD HEDGEHOGS	
YES PLEASE	NO THANK YOU
 Water Please leave multiple dishes of water spread out - we are very thirsty! Cat food Kibble is good for our teeth. Biscuits should be a 'complete' food, not treats. Wet food can also be fed but ensure it is free from flies. We generally prefer meat/poultry flavours but fish is okay to use. Wet food can be either Jelly or Gravy, we don't mind. Dog food can also be used - please ensure kibble is of a small size. Hedgehog Specific Food If using a hedgehog food make sure there are no 'extras' included (see no list) facebook.com/bertieswildlife	 No Treats As wild animals we don't need any treats. We just need you to provide us with some support feeding. For Health Reasons Please DO NOT Feed Us: Milk Bread Mealworms Peanuts (whole or crushed) Sunflower Seeds Oats Raisins (or other dried fruit) Fresh fruit or veg Offal Raw Meat Cakes Human foods Eggs Insects/Slugs/Worms/Anything you've found in your garden. Store bought live or dried insects Anything that isn't on the yes list!

CREDITS: Thank you to Elaine Gardener, [Hedgehog Cabin](#), [Bertie's R&R](#), [Hamble Hedgehogs](#)

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