

Nature Notes June 2012

During the last few weeks we have been looking for signs of hedgehogs in our garden. The first signs are that you see their black, greasy-looking droppings on lawns and paths and this gives some indication of where they go in your garden. As they are nocturnal, we used an infra-red camera set to video mode, to try to track our hedgehog. We were surprised at the speed our hedgehog moved as it raced along in search of food. They are one of nature's tidying-up animals and are looking for slugs, snails, beetles and earthworms, although they will take eggs from ground-nesting birds. However, the most regular place for it to visit was underneath the bird feeders. Perhaps this shouldn't be surprising as I have found a recipe online for hedgehog food made of unsalted peanuts, sunflower seeds, dried mealworms and sultanas. Hedgehogs are lactose intolerant, so please don't put milk out for them as this will cause them to have diarrhoea and to become dehydrated. Instead dog food would be better, or make up a mix of the things mentioned above.

There is a lot of concern about hedgehog as they seem to be disappearing. The loss of hedges and permanent grassland, and the use of pesticides that kill the hedgehog's food are both likely to be significant. The use of slug pellets has long been thought to be a cause, but new research suggests that a hedgehog would have to eat an enormous quantity of the pellets or poisoned slugs for the dose to be lethal. However, it may affect their fertility so that fewer baby hedgehogs are born. If you want to protect your plants against slug attack, the favourite is to bury a jam jar half filled with beer and let the slugs die a happy death, but you could encourage your local hedgehog to help do the job for you!

One way is not to be too tidy (see Stan Clark's excellent article on the dangers of being too tidy). A wood pile provides a good home for a hedgehog and leaving an area around a compost heap to be a bit wilder would encourage the food that the hedgehog is looking for. If you have a big enough garden, a "conservation area" where you let nature take its course, with only a little tidying would be helpful, and beneficial for other wildlife too. There are even ready-made hedgehog homes on the market, as well as pre-packed food made especially for hedgehogs, but it doesn't matter how hedgehog friendly your garden is if it is completely enclosed, hedgehogs won't get in. A hedgehog travels about 1 mile each night, so it needs to get out of (or get into) your garden to do that. They can climb stone walls, but not brick walls or fences. If you scoop out a shallow gap under the fence (even a couple of inches is enough as they can squeeze themselves very small), or remove a brick from the bottom of a wall, your garden can be linked to other gardens around you.

If you find a hedgehog that appears to be in trouble there is a link on the Mammals page of Nature Notes at www.bugbrookelink.co.uk to help you do the right thing. You can also see some clips of our hedgehog there too.

Look out for the kingfisher around the brook and canal. When we moved to Bugbrooke 30 years ago, we often saw a kingfisher, but we haven't seen one here for some years now. During the Birdwatch in 2011 there was a set of results from the marina that had a sighting of a kingfisher and I have heard that a kingfisher is occasionally seen by the brook. If you see one, please let me know.

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