

EUROPEAN HEDGEHOG

These prickly **mammals** are easily recognised by their **spines**. These hollow hairs are made of stiff keratin covering the majority of the hedgehog's body apart from the face, legs and bellies. Each hedgehog can have between 5,000 and 7,000 spines that they depend on for defence from predators such as the badger. The body of adult hedgehog's ranges from 14 to 30 centimetres long with tails between 1 to 6cm. Hedgehogs have surprisingly long legs, about 10cm, which remain concealed under their spines, only visible when they run. Hedgehogs have a muscle around their body that contracts and allows them to curl up into a tight ball. This is used as a defence mechanism from predators, exposing only their prickly spines.

Hedgehogs prefer edge habitats such as hedgerows and pasture, and they can roam up to 4km a night **foraging** for food. In summer, hedgehogs shelter in temporary **nests** during the day. These nests are located in a hedge and comprised of leaves, moss and grass. While hedgehogs may occupy a variety of nests during the active period they do return to individual nest sites. They also utilise rabbit burrows, abandoned silage bales, stonewalls and garden sheds.

Other than bats, the hedgehog is the only Irish mammal that undergoes true **hibernation**. In Ireland hedgehogs hibernate from October until March, shorter than in Britain due to the milder climate. They weigh between 450–650g before hibernation, with their fat stores helping them survive the winter.

Mainly insectivorous eating larvae, earwigs, beetles, spiders, caterpillars, as well as slugs and earthworms; occasionally they eat frogs, small mammals, birds and eggs. Mostly **nocturnal** creatures, they head out at night in search of food but they are sometimes active during the day too, particularly after it rains. With relatively poor eyesight, they rely on their sense of smell and hearing to navigate and search for prey in the dark. While hunting for food they can be quite noisy and you may hear a snorting or snuffling sound while they are hunting for food.

The male hedgehog is called a 'boar' and is slightly larger than a female 'sow'. They breed from April to July, with the majority of births in July where 3-6 young are born. In Ireland newly **independent** juveniles have been observed as late as the end of October, so breeding may occur throughout the active period. In some cases it has been found that a female will have two litters in a year. Baby hedgehogs, or hoglets, are born with their spines concealed beneath their skin and shortly after birth, their spines 'come out', at first they are soft and short spines that harden, becoming stiffer, sharper and growing longer. At 3 weeks old their eyes are open; their spines are effective for defence from predators. They can now safely follow their mother outside the nest as she looks for food for the next 2 weeks. At 6 weeks, they will lead **solitary** lives.

Hedgehogs appear in Irish folklore, with some interesting stories and beliefs. It was widely believed that hedgehogs suckled on cow's milk and they were also wrongly blamed for sucking the contents of hen's eggs in the nest. Another interesting belief was that the hedgehog has the ability to foretell spring weather. Bad weather is expected if when the

hedgehog emerges from hibernation only to return to its place of rest shortly afterwards. If the hedgehog stayed out, it was a sign that good weather was on the way. The hedgehog also features in Irish placenames such as Meenagranoge (Co. Donegal). The Irish for this placename is Mín na Gráinneoige which means mountain pasture of the hedgehog.

The Irish Hedgehog Survey is currently seeking to build a greater understanding of hedgehog distribution and population status across the island of Ireland. Why not take part in the survey if you spot a hedgehog when you are out and about. See the following link for more details:

<https://www.biodiversityireland.ie/projects/additional-survey-schemes/irish-hedgehog-survey/>

KEY DEFINITIONS

Mammal:

Animals that suckle their young on milk.

Spine:

Hollow hairs made stiff with keratin like your nails.

Insectivore:

Species with a diet that consists of insects.

Foraging:

To search for food.

Nocturnal:

Species that is active at night.

Nest:

Shelter or other structure that an animal uses for giving birth or to rest in.

Hibernation:

Extended period of remaining inactive or indoors.

Independent:

Not depending on its parents for food or shelter.

Weaned:

When a baby no longer requires its mother's milk, instead it eats more solid food.

Solitary:

Species that live on their own.

QUIZ SHEET

1. What type of habitats do hedgehogs live in?

2. How many spines do hedgehogs have?

3. When do hedgehogs come out to feed?

4. what do baby hedgehogs (hoglets) feed on?

5. When do hedgehogs give birth?

6. How many babies do hedgehogs give birth to?

7. When are hedgehogs weaned?

8. What do you call an animal that feeds on insects?

9. What is a male hedgehog called?

10. What animal might try to eat a hedgehog?
