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# A Heart for Hedgehogs



Photographers Marie-Luce Hubert and Jean-Louis Klein are always busy looking after animals, be it cats on Greek islands, Eskimo dogs in Canada, or neglected donkeys. But they were at home in France when their neighbour - a twelve-year old boy named Lucas - found four baby hedgehogs that were wandering alone without their mother. Despite efforts to tempt her back with food and water, she still hadn't returned the next day, and the orphans were hungry. Without a hedgehog mother to raise them, there was only one thing Marie-Luce and Jean-Louis could do: rescue the hoglets, and become foster parents to the prickly youngsters.

All photos by  
Klein-Hubert / [naturepl.com](http://naturepl.com)

Small, round and famously covered in a coat of around 6,000 creamy-brown spines, the European hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*) is found in gardens, parks and woodlands across western and central Europe. As their name suggests, they are often associated with hedgerows, which provide ideal locations for nest sites, a good supply of invertebrates on which they feed, and protection from predators.



When threatened, a hedgehog rolls itself up into a ball to protect its soft, furry underbelly. However, these little barbed wire cushions are far from invulnerable. In Britain alone, numbers have fallen from around 30 million in the 1950's to fewer than one million today. Habitat loss caused by the reduction of hedgerows and intensified farming, as well as road deaths, means that the once-common hedgehog is disappearing fast.





'Our neighbours often bring us rescued or injured animals,' says Marie-Luce, 'and we keep a well-stocked animal pharmacy for such occasions. Hedgehogs arrive regularly in the summer months and, most of the time, they are healthy enough that all we have to do is free them from parasites and return them to the place where they were picked up. The four baby hoglets that Lucas found, however, would not have survived by themselves. They were between 3 and 4 weeks old (scarcely weaned) and weighed only 120 to 140 grams. Hedgehogs need to weigh at least 650 g to see them through their winter hibernation, so it was important that they gained weight before we re-released them.

Of the four hoglets, two were males (which we named Jojo and Boule), and two were females (Pique and Mélisse). We knew immediately that Pique and Boule had the best chances for survival as they were the heaviest of the orphans, but we hoped we could save all four! At first, we had to feed them every hour, night and day, using an oral syringe to give them a mixture of kitten food, kitten milk and vitamin paste.



[Right] By the second day, the hoglets were all able to eat without help. They slept in a fleece igloo with soft pillows. It was important to keep them cozy and warm, and maintain a calm environment. Stress in orphaned animals can be a serious issue.

[Left] One of the orphans shares a meal with Melo the kitten, another orphan Marie-Luce and Jean-Louis were busy raising at the time. 'Melo was very tolerant of the little hedgehog,' remembers Marie-Luce. 'He stayed on his side of the bowl and didn't try to chase the usurper away!'



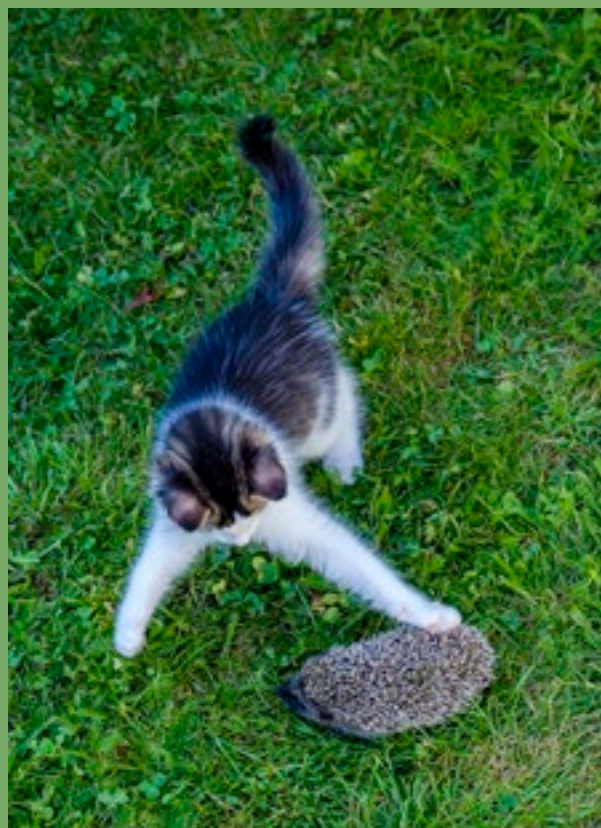
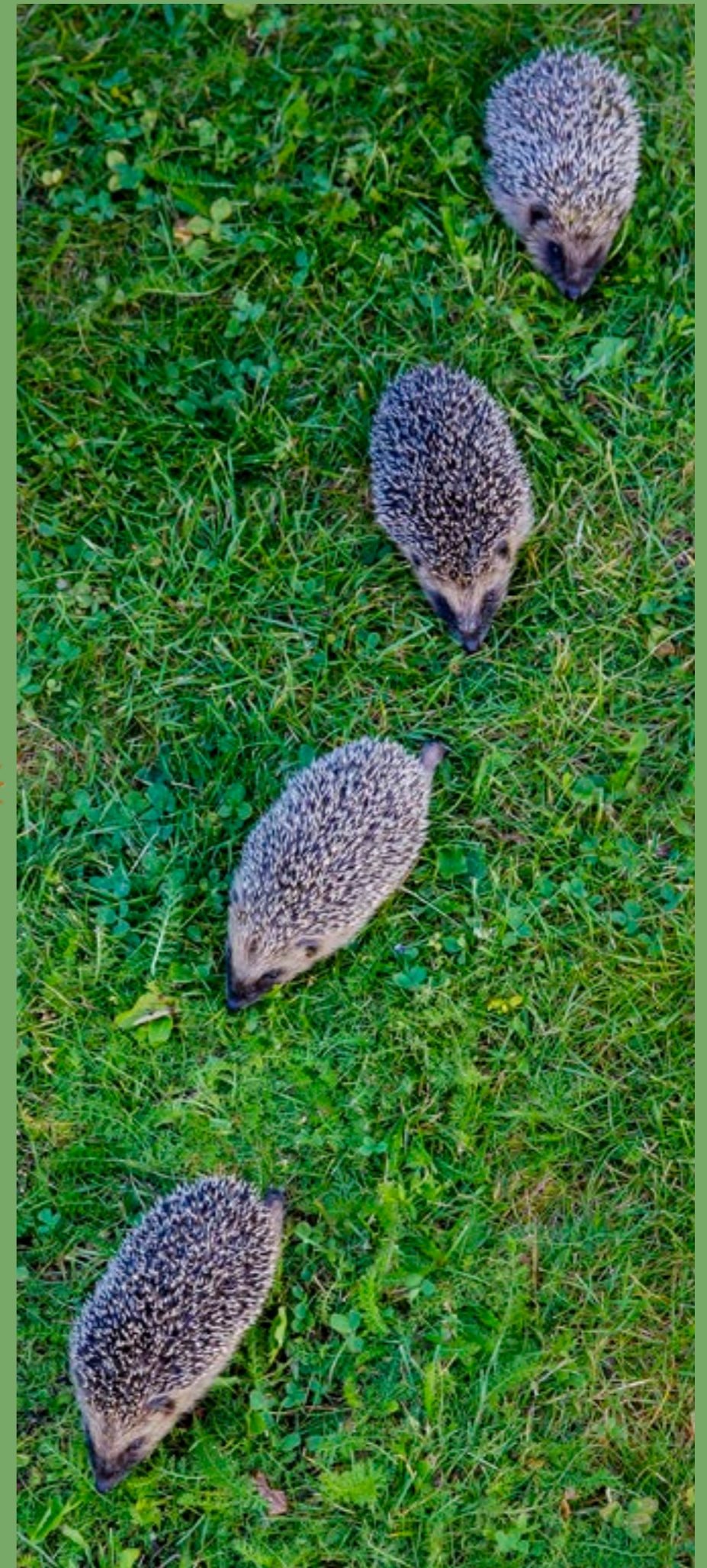
# Jojo

As the orphans grew in strength they began to explore the garden. One day Jojo was climbing the steps and ended up taking the hard way back down!





Most baby hedgehogs are born in June and July, with an average litter size of four or five young, of which two or three are usually weaned successfully. The mother is liable to desert the young if she is disturbed, which is maybe what hapened to Jojo, Boule, Pique and Mélisse. In the wild, young hedgehogs will leave the nest when they are around three to four weeks old to go on foraging trips with their mother. After around ten days of foraging with their mother the young will wander off on their own.



[Left] Melo the kitten tries to play with one of the hoglets, but soon discovers it is too spiky!

[Right] The young hedgehogs didn't seem to regard the kitten as much of a threat, but if he became too playful, they would instinctively curl up into a tight, prickly ball to protect themselves.



# Pique



On extremely hot summer days, Jean-Louis and Marie-Luce could often see the hedgehogs swimming in their small garden pond. It's unclear if they went into the water to refresh themselves or if they were simply attracted by the numerous insects and snails hanging around the water.



Hedgehogs are excellent swimmers, but can easily drown in garden ponds, swimming pools and reservoirs if they can't find a way out. If the pond has steep sides, a simple ramp with grips can be added, allowing hedgehogs and other animals to get in and out of the water with ease.



Combined, gardens provide large nature reserves and a space for wildlife to thrive. By gardening in a wildlife-friendly way, we can help give our spiny companions a home. Log and leaf piles, wilderness areas or purpose-built shelters make great places for hedgehogs to nest and hibernate. They use hedges planted along farms and gardens as 'highways' to move from place to place, hiding out from predators under leafy shrubs. In return for this protection, they help keep gardens healthy by eating pests.



Hedgehogs make brilliant neighbours. Providing food, water and easy access to your garden is a great way to help them. Their favourite foods are millipedes and beetles, but they also snack on slugs and snails. For this reason, gardeners should avoid using slug pellets, which not only poison the slugs, but also the hedgehogs that eat them.

When a hedgehog finds something that smells unfamiliar, it may lick or chew the object, creating a foamy saliva which it spreads over its body with its tongue. The first time Marie-Luce and Jean-Louis witnessed this behaviour - called self-anointing - it came as quite a surprise. 'Jojo had found a worm,' says Marie-Luce, 'and he began chewing it, muttering loudly. Then he started to lick the spines on his flanks, coating them with the worm-scented saliva. To do this, he had to twist and contort himself into a variety of funny positions.'

# Jojo



'Why hedgehogs self-anoint is still a mystery. What we have observed, however, is that when a 'clean' hedgehog encounters a 'self-anointed' one, it becomes very interested in the scent and may even try to lick the foam from the anointed hedgehog and smear it on itself. Perhaps, therefore, this behaviour has some kind of social significance.'

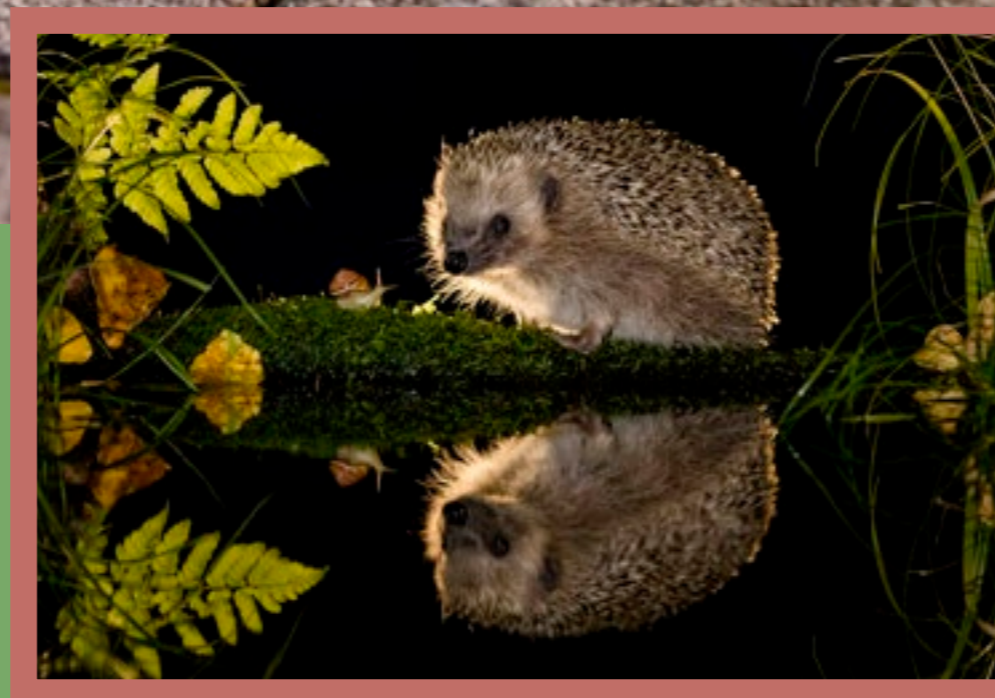






Hedgehogs are nocturnal and generally only come out at night. Some hedgehogs may exhibit crepuscular activity (meaning they are active in early morning and early evening). During the summer months, for example, female hedgehogs may come out in the late afternoon to forage for nest material and extra food for their young. Like their wild counterparts, Pique, Boule, Jojo and Mélisse spent their nights snuffling around the garden, but they also came out during daylight hours to feast on the food that Marie-Luce and Jean-Louis provided for them.

Hedgehogs have poor eyesight, so they rely largely on their other senses - such as their excellent hearing - to help them navigate in the dark. Above all, hedgehogs employ their highly sophisticated sense of smell. Their moist noses are able to sniff out supper under an inch of soil, as well as picking up scents in the breeze. As they shuffle their way through the hedges, they sniff and grunt like pigs —hence the name 'hedgehog'.





Access between gardens is critical for hedgehogs. They need to be able to roam far and wide in search of food, mates and nesting sites. A 13cm / 5in square hole in a fence (or a shallow channel dug beneath garden boundaries) is sufficient to allow free movement. Why not get together with your neighbours and connect your gardens?





The orphaned hedgehogs grew up around two litters of kittens that the photographers were raising at the same time.

'It was a lot of fun watching them interact,' remembers Marie-Luce. 'The kittens were quite interested in the hedgehogs, but quickly found out how prickly they were! Cat paws are very sensitive. The hedgehogs, in turn, showed curiosity towards the felines and their approaches probably had something to do with the kittens' strange smell. Despite how it may look, there was no 'friendship bond' between the kittens and the hedgehogs, not like you'd expect to see between some cats and dogs. Their interactions were purely inquisitive in nature.'

A hedgehog's pointed teeth are perfect for cracking open snail shells!



Hedgehogs are insectivores that eat all manner of garden invertebrates such as beetles, millipedes, caterpillars and earwigs, as well as worms, slugs and snails. More infrequently they will take advantage of carrion, amphibians, birds' eggs and fallen fruit.

Every day, Marie-Luce and Jean-Louis went looking in their compost heaps and in the

nearby woodland for creepy-crawlies to offer their prickly patients. Neighbours also brought them unwanted garden pests such as slugs and snails. If necessary, the hedgehogs' diet could be supplemented with mealworms, scrambled eggs and fruit. Banana, apples, plum and pear cut into small pieces were all offered as tasty snacks. At first, the hedgehogs were weighed every day, then once every three days. Pique and Boule reached a kilo, while Joje & Mélisse reached 900 / 940 grams - comfortably above the minimum of 650 g required to survive hibernation.



The hedgehogs' diet was supplemented with vitamin paste to help keep them healthy and strong



As the colder weather takes hold in the autumn months, hedgehogs must feed as much as possible and begin building their nests in preparation for their winter hibernation.



Female hedgehogs are capable of having a second litter in late September or October - but this often leads to 'autumn orphans'. At this time of year food supplies begin to dwindle and babies born later in the season may struggle to gain enough weight for hibernation.



# Boule

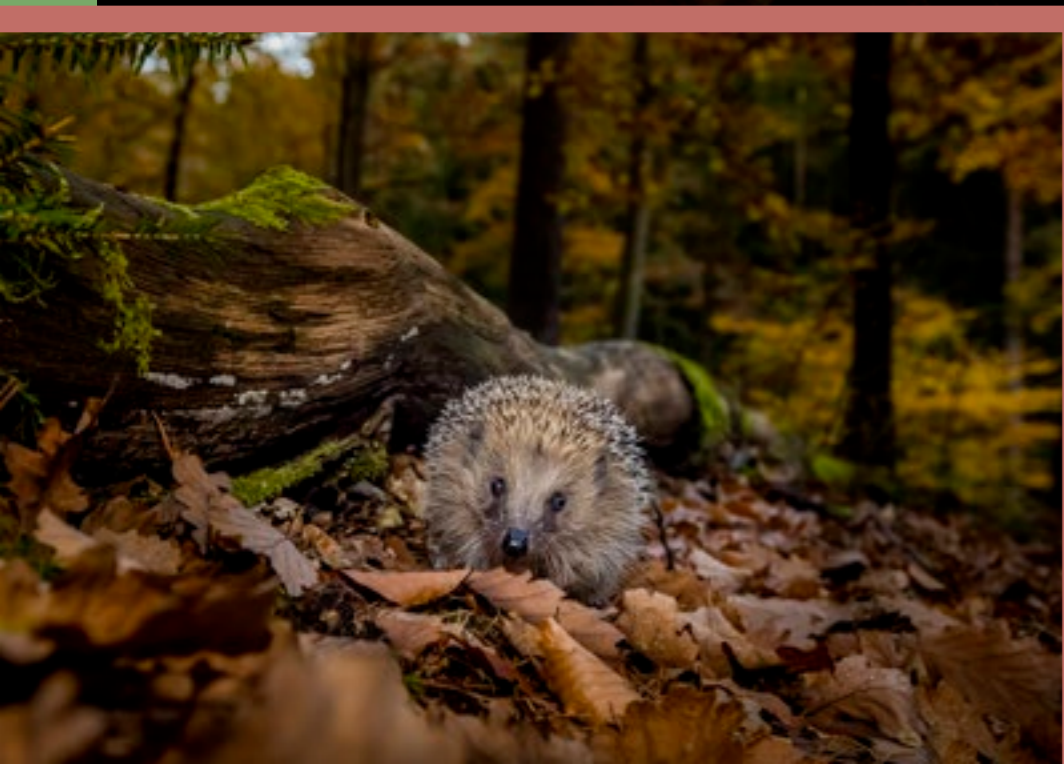
With the arrival of autumn, it was time for Jean-Louis and Marie-Luce to return their hedgehogs to the wild. They invited Lucas (their young neighbour who originally found the helpless hoglets) to help them with the release. Having gained more than enough fat reserves to see them through hibernation, Pique and Boule were released first, at a carefully chosen site with no roads nearby, few natural predators and access to

food sources, such as old orchards and seasonal pastures. Lucas helped build shelters for them, stuffing wooden boxes with hay and covering them over with waterproof plastic and a roof of vegetation for additional protection and camouflage. Each shelter was supplied with food and water, and the hedgehogs were placed inside. Then it was simply a case of crossing fingers and hoping that everything went well.



Hedgehogs are one of the few mammals that are true hibernators. Though it is not really asleep, a hibernating hedgehog will drop its body temperature to match the ambient temperature. This allows it to save a lot of energy but slows down all other bodily functions, making normal activity impossible. Hedgehogs usually hibernate from October/November through to March/April. Research has shown that each individual is likely to move nesting sites at least once during this period and so hedgehogs can sometimes be seen out and about during the hibernation season.

During winter hibernation, the hedgehog will sleep in a specially built nest in thick undergrowth, piles of leaves or even under sheds and unlit bonfires. It will live off the fat stores it has built up over the summer



To maximize chances of survival and avoid food competition or overlapping home ranges, Jojo and Mélisse were not released at the same place at Pique and Boule.

'From the beginning, Jojo behaved differently to his brother and sisters and needed more care as a baby, so it was decided that he would be safer hibernating in our garden,' says Marie-Luce. 'We did, however, try to return Mélisse back to the wild. While scouting for a suitable location, we discovered a forest bordering old orchards and pastures. But as we progressed, we found an active and very large badger sett. Badgers are the main predators of hedgehogs, so after taking these images of Mélisse, we had to abandon the release attempt. We planned to find a better place for her when we returned from a short trip, but whilst we were away she took up residence in one of our hedgehog boxes and went into hibernation. We didn't want to disturb her, so she spent the winter with us and her brother Jojo.'



Hedgehogs aren't territorial but have home ranges between 10 - 50 hectares in size. The more these ranges overlap, the greater the competition for food.



mélisse



# Jojo



'Jojo had trouble going into deep hibernation and woke up quite often during the winter,' recalls Marie-Luce. 'Luckily, he'd gained plenty of weight beforehand, so it wasn't a problem for his energetic balance and most of the winter was quite mild anyway. But we always made sure dry food was available in case he or Mélisse needed to top up their fat reserves.'



'It was quite a surprise to see Jojo padding around in the snow that morning. It's rare to find hedgehogs out and about in such conditions. We prepared an extra meal for him and he went back to bed soon afterwards, sleeping this time for a month in a row.'



'We have many fond memories of raising the orphaned hoglets,' say Jean-Louis and Marie-Luce. 'Mélisse woke up again in spring, having lost only 150 g. She's been roaming in our garden and neighbouring gardens ever since. Jojo, after a while, left our garden, ready for new adventures. We hope that he, Pique and Boule are all doing fine in the gardens and woods that they now call home.'



'Rescuing Pique, Jojo, Mélisse and Boule was an infinitely rewarding experience, and it is our greatest hope that they will go on to have babies of their own. We continue to educate our neighbours about the benefits of hedgehogs and how to help them. If we all made our gardens wildlife-friendly, the future for this, and other wild species, would be bright indeed.'



A photograph of a hedgehog crossing a road at night. The hedgehog is in the foreground, facing right, with its spines clearly visible. In the background, a car is approaching with its headlights on, creating a blurred effect. The scene is set against a dark night sky with some ambient light from the car and streetlights.

## Helping Hedgehogs

There are many things you can do to encourage hedgehogs into your garden and help them to thrive:

- 1 Put out a bowl of meaty cat / dog food and some fresh water. You could set up a feeding station by cutting a hole in a plastic storage box and weighing down the lid with bricks. This will prevent cats and foxes stealing the food. Mealworms are a tasty treat too, but avoid putting out bread and milk. Hedgehogs are lactose intolerant so milk can make them very ill. Offer them water instead.
- 2 Build a hedgehog home. These are cheap and simple to make and provide ideal places for hedgehogs to nest and hibernate. Leaf piles provide ideal nesting material so rather than clear them all away, leave them in quiet, undisturbed corners of the garden.
- 3 Hedgehogs are natural pest controllers. Avoid using slug pellets or other chemicals that may poison them.
- 4 Create hedgehog highways. Get together with your neighbours to cut a hole in your fence or dig a channel beneath boundaries to connect your gardens.
- 5 If you have a pond, make sure you provide a ramp or shallow area so that hedgehogs can easily climb back out. A length of chicken wire can also be used as an escape ladder.
- 6 Check bonfires by carefully turning them over before you set them alight. If you build your bonfire on the same day you plan to light it, you can reduce the chances of hedgehogs taking up residence in the woodpile.
- 7 Be careful when turning or forking over compost heaps. They make ideal nesting sites for hedgehogs.
- 8 Cover any open drains. Hedgehogs can fall in and get stuck!
- 9 Be a wildlife-friendly gardener! Aim for a variety of plants and habitats. Compost & woodpiles will encourage plenty of insects.
- 10 Drive carefully, especially at night when hedgehogs and other nocturnal species are active.

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Contact:

[timaldred@naturepl.com](mailto:timaldred@naturepl.com)  
+44 (0)117 911 4675