

## Hedgehogs

A friend mentioned that they had recently seen a large hedgehog running down the road at Lower Bushford just a few days after the New Year, and was worried that it ought to have been hibernating. Well, in a sense, it probably was, because hibernation for hedgehogs is not like it is for dormice or tortoises, both of which enter a long torpor with the bodily processes significantly slowed. Hedgehog hibernation is a more



casual affair – the start and end are weather dependent and it often involves several periods awake when the animals feed and often move nests. Bats hibernate in a similar way, so during a mild spell in winter both bats and hedgehogs can be out and about. The snag is, of course, that this all involves energy so it is vital for them to obtain food – an unwise awakening in unsuitable weather with no food can result in starvation. (A similar situation applies to hibernating butterflies, who are often awoken at an unsuitable time when they hibernate indoors – if they do not find food, and this is unlikely in say, February, they will run out of stored energy and die).

The distribution of hedgehogs in our area is puzzling – the habitat would seem ideal with plenty of cover and food (slugs and snails!) – but they do not seem abundant. In many parts of the UK, flattened hedgehogs on the road are a common sight, but not here. One theory is that this is due to badger predation. Badgers certainly do eat hedgehogs and we do have high density of badgers so it is a possibility. Another theory is that our winters are too mild and hedgehogs wake up at inappropriate times during winter when there is no food.

The hedgehog population also seems to be falling nationally though from my personal experience they seem very accident prone so it is hardly surprising! When we lived in Northamptonshire hedgehogs were common in the garden but they managed to get themselves stuck in sorts of silly situations – for example, one leg caught between edging tiles around a flowerbed, or trying to get through a hole under the door into the garage which was too small but being unable to back out due to the one-way nature of the spines. (This latter adventure resulted in a major operation with chisels and saws). And the number of hedgehogs that have drowned in swimming pools and ponds are legion. Still, to hear that snuffling sound on a summer evening is a pleasant experience, and allows us to come face to face with a native mammal, which is otherwise not easy to do.