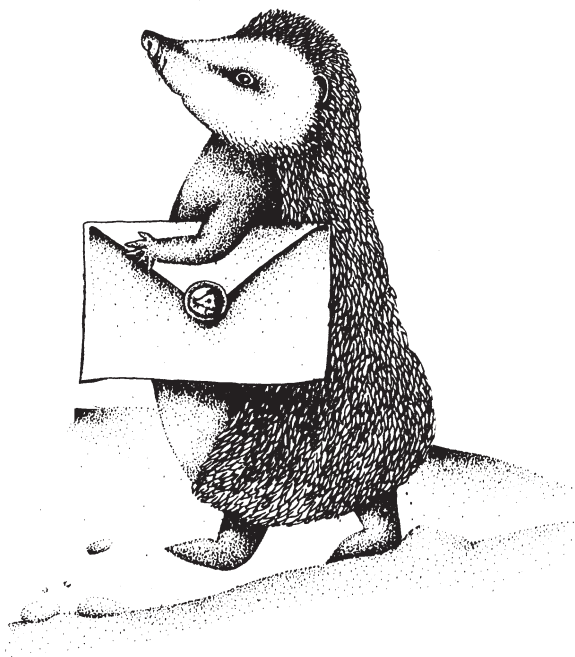


*British Hedgehog
Preservation Society*

A Letter From Spike



Part of the

Know your Hedgehog

series

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A LETTER TO CHILDREN

Hi there!

I'm pleased to meet you. My name is Spike and I belong to the species *Erinaceus europaeus*, more commonly known as hedgehogs. I am happy and healthy and I am not a pest. In fact, I'm quite a helpful fellow to have around as I will happily gobble the slugs in your garden. I'm what you might call a natural pest controller.

I live here in this garden, but I'm not confined to this area. I travel some distance on my nightly foragings, looking for tasty meals. Its a great life! Snoozing all day and roaming at night, this is what is known as being nocturnal. You humans are diurnal, awake by day and asleep at night.

I quite like the human folk who live at the end of my garden, they can be very helpful. They put out cat or dog food, odd meaty table scraps, and always leave a shallow dish of water, delicious on a warm evening. We hedgehogs, although we need a high protein diet, do enjoy a variety of foodstuffs, like Zina (she's my Aunt) who adores dog food, and Titch (he's my big brother) thinks cat biscuits are a delicacy not to be missed!

If you find one of my friends who, by hibernation time (November/December), looks a bit on the skinny side, please try to fatten him/her up. We need to be 'fatty' to survive the wintertime. The absolute minimum weight we should be in autumn is 450grams (1lb). We need to weigh at least this amount to survive the period of hibernation. Whilst 'sleeping' (hibernation is not really sleep, our bodies slow down their use of energy during very cold weather when our natural food has disappeared) we live off our body reserves, these are the brown and white fatty deposits which we build up during the plentiful season. So, if you see an underweight hedgehog look after him and fatten him up before winter arrives. If he doesn't put on enough weight in time for hibernation he must either stay awake until spring when he can rejoin us in the garden, or risk hibernating and not wake up.



Thinking of hibernation makes me feel cold and I think about the horrible scare I received last year. I woke from deep hibernation to find myself being lifted upwards towards the sky, I thought that perhaps I'd grown wings and had learned to fly, but no; I twitched, all my spines were intact. No wings had sprouted during my hognap.

Mary, the eldest girl who lives at the house, called to her sister to watch out in case Hoggy (that's her name for me) was asleep in the dead leaves. Luckily for me she called because I'd been gathered up with the dead leaves and I was about to be stacked on the November bonfire. I'd have been a very hot hog and not a very happy hog at that! So please take care when you are building your bonfires. Check under any pile of leaves, it is a cosy place for a hognap. They have a dog here. It's a great lollopy creature, called an Afghan hound, and it dashes frantically about the garden. At my first meeting with it I was scared; I rolled myself into a tight ball, clever this trick! How's it done? I'll tell you later, this fooled the dog; it tried pushing me along with its nose but my sharp spines hurt it. The dog leaves me alone now and instead it chases sparrows.

The spine trick, Well it's a clever action done with muscles. When we are young our muscles are weak and undeveloped. It takes time to get this trick right; I'm an expert! The action is complicated but I'll try to explain. It's the contraction of special muscles in the skin, a pair of muscles pull the skin forward over my head (like frowning, only harder) then another pair of muscles pull the skin backwards over my bottom. The skin is baggy by design, thus the trick is completed; everything is tucked in out of sight. With practice I can do the whole thing before you say "hog's dinner". I look like a prickly ball with my 5,000 creamy white and brown spines sticking out. I can stay like this for hours, it's a great defence trick against most enemies.



Yesterday, I was out having a stroll by moonlight, when I met my old chum, Snuffles. He's a character, he's the best swimmer, digger and climber in these parts. Also, he tells wonderful stories. Well, he told me a sad tale which made my spines stand on end. He's an ardent traveller and his adventures take him far away. He has been known to cover between one and two miles (about 2 or 3kms) in one night I'm not so energetic! He'd been out the night before and he'd seen several of my friends lying squashed on the road. The journey from one field to another is always a dangerous business, sometimes it involves crossing a busy road. There's one road in particular which is a favourite place to cross; the field opposite has some tasty food on offer, but it's also a deadly spot. Please tell the grown-up humans to take care as even our tough spines can't save us from motor car wheels.

Snuffles also told me about the scare he had last summer when, on the lookout for food, he had found a yoghurt carton. Well, he got his snout and head inside and gobbled up the sweet contents, but when he'd finished found his spines were wedged inside the carton and he couldn't get out. Luckily, he managed to rip free and, by using his sharp claws, he shattered the plastic and escaped. If he hadn't he would have died from starvation, a horrific and painfully slow death. Children, please avoid such accidents by taking home all your litter. Plastic bags, empty bottles, cartons and crisp packets, they are very dangerous to us animals.

Did some one mention fleas? Yes, we do sometimes have them but we don't need them. We get them from our mother, not a very nice gift! If you over-winter any hedgehogs you can get rid of our fleas by using a pyrethrum-based flea powder especially suitable for caged birds or small animals like hamsters, such as Johnson's Small Animal Insecticidal Powder. Dust us lightly amongst the spines, avoiding the eyes, once is usually enough. What a relief! Also our fleas are host specific which means they die if they leave a hedgehog!

Another way you can help us is by tidying away netting in the garden; tie up the football goal net and tennis nets when not in use. Secure the strawberry and pea nets. We can very easily get our dainty feet trapped in the mesh. Please take care and save us from a horrid accident. Also, take care when using the garden mower or strimmer. These can cause nasty accidents to both you and us. Slug pellets are also dangerous to us. The pellets contain a poison.

Avoid using these substances in the garden. Try old-fashioned remedies like slug traps baited with beer. We like to eat slugs; why not let us control these pests for you? We are natural pest controllers, remember?

Well, thinking about food and the amounts we hedgehogs consume makes me feel hungry. I'll dash now (did you know i can travel at 30-40 metres in a minute, that's two miles an hour. Snuffles travels at six miles an hour over short distances, I told you he was fit).

Well, I'll be seeing you about. Please take extra care and look after us, we are your spikey friends and Britain's only spiny mammal!

Love Spike

Adapted from a story by Mrs C M Marsh (membership number 206237)

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