

GUIDANCE FOR RELEASING HEDGEHOGS THAT HAVE BEEN REHABILITATED - A COLLABORATIVE VIEW



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Every year thousands of hedgehogs are released back into the wild from rehabilitation. The best part of the job is returning a hedgehog you have cared for back to its natural environment – but where should that release site be?

We have been alerted to the fact people are actively taking hedgehogs long distances, sometimes hundreds of miles away from the site they were found, for releases into unfamiliar (and possibly unsuitable) habitat. After all the time, money and care that has gone into rescue and rehabilitation, the right release site is vital to give your patient the very best chance of surviving.

To try to offer best practice advice, The British Hedgehog Preservation Society (BHPS), British Wildlife Rehabilitation Council (BWRC), The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), Vale Wildlife Hospital (VWH) and the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) put their heads together with Dr Nigel Reeve and Dr Pat Morris to come up with a guide for rehabilitators that all collaborators are happy to put their name to. This document is a result of that collaboration, and is based on detailed research by Dr Nigel Reeve and Dr Pat Morris, published in major research journals.

We must always remember that, much as we love them, hedgehogs are wild animals and it would be cruel to not allow them their freedom. Healthy hedgehogs should be released and allowed to be wild again. They will travel about a mile in a night, so an enclosed 'safe' garden is not suitable (it's just a bigger enclosure) and trying to ensure that they never encounter a road, dog or any other danger is just not practical.

Let me go home:

First and foremost, the best place to release a hedgehog is where it came from. The hedgehog will be familiar with nesting and feeding opportunities within its home range, and there will be an existing hedgehog population there. The people who originally found the hedgehog will usually have a vested interest in keeping an eye out for the hedgehog and any further problems it may have. Experienced, mature and even juvenile hedgehogs will be specialists at exploiting the habitat that they have been born into. There are most likely both urban and countryside specialists, and neither may be successful if translocated between habitat types. Hedgehogs build a cognitive map of their home range and the environment will be familiar to them. Long-distance translocation of hedgehogs (out of the local area) is not normally necessary to safeguard the welfare of hedgehogs in the UK or for the conservation of this species, therefore long distance releases are unnecessary and it would be unreasonable and reckless to do so. Undertaking such practices will likely incur risks associated with moving animals around the country. Furthermore, it has been reported that some rehabilitators will use the same garden or patch of land for many releases. To ensure success, multiple hedgehogs should not be released into one area (unless they originated there).

Exceptions:

It is clearly in the best interests of all parties for hedgehogs to be released in their original capture site, meaning that this should be a rule of thumb for all releases. There are, however, certain circumstances under which exceptions may need to be applied. Such exceptions may include hedgehogs that have been brought in, for example, from a garden where a dog attacked it; we would then advise release in the same area, but not in that garden. Sometimes no information is available for the exact site the hedgehog was found; in that case every effort should be made to locate the origin of the hedgehog, even if it's just the general area. If this is not possible and the hedgehog has been given a clean bill of health, it should be released into the locality it is likely to have come from and into the same habitat type (e.g. suburban or rural etc.) as long as the area has a known population of hedgehogs and plenty of food, water and nesting opportunities. If the hedgehog has been rescued from a development site, select a large area of suitable habitat nearby.

Welfare:

It is not in a hedgehog's interest to spend extended and unnecessary periods of time being transported long distances. Such journeys will stress the hedgehog, which may have severe health implications, and the 'new' site may not be able to effectively support hedgehogs.

Somewhere 'safe':

Hedgehogs normally use about 1 hectare (2.4 acres) per night. Walled gardens, or even enclosed sprawling country estates that appear 'safe' could quickly become overcrowded and in any case are just large 'cages', very likely to cause stress as the hedgehogs will constantly try to find a way out. If the new site IS escapable, translocated hedgehogs may be at greater risk of road mortality and injury due to the long-distance movements commonly made by hedgehogs that have been translocated. Hedgehogs should **NEVER** be released on islands to which they are not native.

A rehabilitation that results in a wild animal not being returned to the wild is a failed rehabilitation. The whole point is to give the hedgehog a second chance at a natural and free life – they are not pets and it is not fair on them to treat them as such. Releasing hedgehogs at a site because we want to do something nice for the landowner, or to gain publicity, is not fair on the hedgehog and should not be considered. Confining wild hedgehogs will inevitably have negative consequences and will not lead to effective conservation of the species.

Infectious Disease and parasites:

Hedgehogs are affected by multiple infectious diseases and parasites. Our current understanding of the conditions that adversely affect hedgehog health, and their geographical distribution in Great Britain, is limited. Translocations over large distances risk introduction of pathogens into new areas of the country, putting the health of other hedgehogs in the release region at risk. Conversely, the translocated hedgehog may be exposed to novel conditions or parasites at a distant release site, compromising its welfare. The truth is that we know very little about the epidemiology of hedgehog diseases and need to learn more. Strains of disease-causing organisms differ regionally and even locally, and their distribution within habitats can be markedly changeable. These may spread, unobserved, through hedgehogs within rescue centres and be spread further by translocation. This is a risk to the recipient population and to the ones being introduced, if the introduced hedgehogs (which may be immunologically naïve if captive-reared, and highly vulnerable) have poor resistance to those diseases found in the recipient population.

Local Population Adaptations:

Within a national population of free-living wildlife, there may be adaptations (genetic or behavioural) to the local environment (e.g. climate, predator risk). Translocations over large distances may disrupt this population structure and risk compromising animal welfare.

Ecology:

Releasing hedgehogs in sites other than where they were found could have negative impacts on local hedgehog populations with competition for food and nesting habitat. This may displace or impact upon other wildlife; for instance, predation of ground nesting birds has been seen to be a serious issue in some habitats, and the potential ramifications of an unplanned release could be disastrous for the local ecosystem and other species of conservation concern.

In summary:

- This collaboration strongly recommends that rescued hedgehogs should be released where they were found whenever possible.
- If this is not possible they should at least be released in the same locality - selecting a reasonably large area of habitat, similar to that from which the hedgehog originated, minimising risks to the released hedgehog and to local populations.
- Healthy hedgehogs should never be released into an enclosed area (however large that enclosure is).
- One patch of land is not suitable for release of multiple rehabilitated hedgehogs unless that is where they originated.
- Hedgehogs should not be transported long distances for release without exceptional circumstances making it necessary and only if a prior disease risk analysis has been undertaken.
- This advice refers to hedgehogs rescued from where they are native to the land and can legally be released.
- The hedgehogs' welfare is paramount, and our feelings must be secondary to that. They are wild animals and should never be treated as pets or property.
- Best practice would be to conduct post-release monitoring when possible to inform release strategies.