

HEDGEHOG HIBERNATION WEIGHT - A COLLABORATIVE VIEW



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There is a lot of debate surrounding survival weights for hibernating hedgehogs and it is confusing for the public and rehabilitators alike. We have also been alerted to the fact people are actively going out and looking for healthy hedgehogs to collect that are under 600 g to take into care. To try to address this, The British Hedgehog Preservation Society (BHPS), British Veterinary Zoological Society (BVZS), British Wildlife Rehabilitation Council (BWRC), The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), Secret World Wildlife Rescue and Vale Wildlife Hospital put their heads together to come up with a simple to follow guide for rehabilitators that all six bodies would be happy to put their name to. This document is the result of that collaboration.

Firstly, it is important to ensure that advice is based on data and sound research. Whilst experience in the field of hedgehog rehabilitation is priceless, 'hunches' cannot be properly defended against somebody else's hunch if that happens to be different. It is also important to distinguish between wild hedgehogs and captive reared (rehabilitated) ones, particularly with respect to body weights in autumn. Sometimes, despite acting with the best of intentions people can cause serious welfare issues for hedgehogs, so we hope this scientific advice will offer a little clarity and prevent hedgehogs from being taken from their natural habitat when not necessary.

WILD (free-living) hedgehogs

Advice to bear in mind when the public call about a hedgehog in the WILD

1. No specific weight will guarantee survival.
2. Our current evidence is that, if otherwise healthy, young hedgehogs weighing over 450 g can survive hibernation.^{1,2}
3. Greater weight may enhance survival chances, but there is no evidence of this.
4. They should normally be rescued at weights less than 450 g in late October - February (depending on weather, frequency at feeding stations, etc).
5. Rescue of young hedgehogs at weights over 450 g is unnecessary based on weight alone at any time of the year. Weight is irrelevant if out during day or appears ill or injured. Indeed, "rescue" of hedgehogs at weights above 450 g based on weight alone is counterproductive and strongly discouraged. Bringing a healthy hedgehog into rescue is stressful for the hedgehog, and parasite burdens may be amplified causing serious problems for the animal. There are also risks involved with being in close proximity to other hedgehogs with possible contagious conditions.
6. If a hedgehog is out during the day or appears ill or injured in any way it should be brought into care regardless of weight. (NOTE: There are exceptions to the 'Out During Day' rule, e.g. if it is a female hedgehog nest building during breeding season or taking a break from the nest, or perhaps gardening work has disturbed a healthy adult. These will be adult hedgehogs moving with purpose and out for only short spells at a time).

Once a hedgehog has been brought into care and is being looked after until release, the advice is slightly different because the hedgehog will lose weight upon release. Therefore the advice below is for rehabilitators for **hedgehogs already in care:**

CAPTIVE-REARED or JUVENILES (rehabilitated animals)

Advice for hedgehogs in care

1. Captive hedgehogs put on weight quickly compared to wild counterparts of similar age (sometimes reaching double natural weight for that age).
2. They shed this excess weight on release and thus lose weight faster than wild hedgehogs.²
3. They should not be released at weights below 500 g in autumn (600 g in very late autumn/early winter).
4. Rehabilitated hedgehogs can be released during the winter if they weigh over 600 g, have passed a veterinary health check, are soft-released in areas where the individuals were originally found (if not possible see BHPS release guidance – contact BHPS for a copy), and during periods of mild weather (> 0 °C) over winter.³
5. There is no evidence that greater weight (over 600 g) will enhance survival.
6. Excessive weight is probably not beneficial and may be harmful. Hedgehogs in care are usually put on a diet if they reach as much as 1 kg when being over-wintered. However, optimum weights for hedgehogs vary tremendously between individuals. The optimum weight for one hedgehog could be for example 800 g whereas another could be well within its normal weight range at 1100 g. Rescue centres have found that keeping hedgehogs below 1 kg in weight when overwintering has limited the number developing problems due to being overweight while in captivity.
7. Keeping hedgehogs in sheds or garages over winter for hibernation means that they are neither warm nor cold and this is a very difficult situation for hibernators. The optimum temperature for hibernation is 4 °C. Hibernating at higher temperatures will increase their use of fat reserves.
8. No specific weight will guarantee survival.

¹ Morris P. A. (1984) An estimate of the minimum body weight necessary for hedgehogs (*Erinaceus europaeus*) to survive hibernation. *Journal of Zoology*, London 203:291-294

² Morris P. A. (2018) Hedgehog. Collins New Naturalist Library, Book 137. Pages 184-190 in particular.

³ Yarnell R. et al. (2018) Should rehabilitated hedgehogs be released in winter? A comparison of survival, nest use and weight change in wild and rescued animals. *European Journal of Wildlife Research*. 65: 6. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10344-018-1244-4>