

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 600g to take into care. To try to address this, The British Hedgehog Preservation Society (BHPS), British Wildlife Rehabilitation Council (BWRC) and The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) put their heads together to try to come up with a simple to follow guide for rehabilitators that all four bodies would be happy to put their name to. This document is a result of that collaboration.

First of all 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 (rehab) ones, particularly with respect to body weights in autumn. Sometimes 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. Those hibernating at less than 450g will probably not survive (although some occasionally do).
3. Greater weight may enhance survival chances, but there is no evidence of this.
4. They can, and many do, survive winter weighing less than 600g (eg 52% of juveniles)
5. They should normally be rescued at weights less than 450g in October - February (depending on weather, frequency at feeding stations, etc)
6. Rescue at 500+ g is unnecessary based on weight alone at any time of the year. (weight irrelevant if out during day unnecessarily or appears ill or injured).
7. "Rescue" at weights above 600g based on weight alone is counterproductive and strongly discouraged. Bringing a healthy hedgehog into rescue is stressful for the hedgehog, and parasite burdens are amplified causing serious problems for the animal. Also there are risks involved with being in close proximity to other hedgehogs with possible contagious conditions.
8. 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: This advice is regarding Autumn hedgehogs - there is an exception to the 'Out During Day' rule if it is a female hedgehog nest building during breeding season or taking a break from the nest. These will be adult hedgehogs and move with purpose, out for short spells at a time).*

Once a hedgehog has been brought into care and is being over-wintered, or 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 (rehab 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.
3. They should not be released at weights below 500g in autumn (600g in very late autumn/early winter).
4. Greater weight (eg over 600g) may enhance survival, but there is no evidence for this.
5. Excessive weight is probably not beneficial and may be harmful. Hedgehogs in care are put on a diet if they reach as much as 1kg when being over-wintered. Optimum weights for hedgehogs vary tremendously between individuals. The optimum weight for one hedgehog could be for example 800g whereas another could be well within its normal weight range at 1100g. We have found that keeping hedgehogs below 1kg in weight when overwintering has limited the number developing problems due to being overweight while in captivity.
6. No specific weight will guarantee survival.