

The Hedgehog

Latin: *Erinaceus europaeus* (“Erinaceus” means “spiky wall”)
Irish: Gráinneog (meaning “horrible one”)



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The hedgehog is easy to recognise. Its head and back are covered with sharp spines, each 2–3 cms long. These spines are actually modified hair (much harder than normal hair). If frightened or attacked, it will curl up into a ball, and uses the spines to protect its body. An adult hedgehog has approximately 5,000–7,000 spines. A hedgehog is about 25 cm long. It has a sharp snout, relatively long legs

(for its size), and a short tail. Its small bright eyes cannot see very well but it has a very good sense of smell and great hearing. For food, hedgehogs eat caterpillars, earthworms, slugs, beetles, snails and insects – and are very noisy eaters! They also make pig-like squeals when distressed and grunt when courting. Hedgehogs generally live alone and only look for company when they are mating. They live in

woodlands and gardens. In the wild, a hedgehog can live for about three to five years, but some can live up to 10 years. Hedgehogs are nocturnal and wander about at night, travelling about 3 km in search of food. If you see one during the day, it is possible that it could be ill. Hedgehogs hibernate in winter when food becomes scarce. They wake up now and then and feed, often when the weather is mild. They build nests out of leaves, grass and other vegetation, often under hedges, in compost heaps and beneath piles of wood. Few animals will eat a hedgehog because of its spines, but badgers will. The biggest killer of hedgehogs are cars and in the garden, slug pellets. Hedgehogs are a gardener’s friend, eating slugs and caterpillars and not doing any damage.

Hedgehogs and their young



The hedgehog will have four or five young at a time, one litter between May and July and often another in August or September. The young are born with soft spines, which will soon harden. A baby hedgehog is called a hoglet and is also known as a pup, kit or piglet.

Hedgehogs in Ireland



Though hedgehogs are common throughout Ireland, they are not native to this country. It is thought they were introduced by humans, possibly the Normans in the 13th century.

The hedgehog in Ireland is the same species as that found in the rest of Europe. There are about a dozen other species of hedgehog and these are found in South East Asia, China and Africa.

Hedgehogs are protected in Ireland. If you want to keep one captive (perhaps because it is ill) you need to apply to the National Parks and Wildlife Service for a license. Hedgehogs cannot be sold.



Are hedgehogs and porcupines related?

As both hedgehogs and porcupines have spines, you might think that they are related, but they are not. Hedgehogs belong to a group of animals known as “insectivores”, small mammals that feed mainly on insects and similar small creatures. Porcupines are rodents and, being herbivores, mostly eat plant food such as bark and leaves. The hedgehog doesn’t really have any close relatives. However, it is thought that there is some distant link to moles and shrews.



Porcupines (above) are not related to hedgehogs.

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