

British Organization Aims to Protect European Hedgehog

The British Hedgehog Preservation Society works to conserve its native hedgehog.

By Angela Pham

Posted: September 19, 2008, 7:30 p.m. EDT

© Courtesy Folly Wildlife Rescue

The European hedgehog is considered a threatened species — its population has plummeted by 50 percent in some areas of the United Kingdom.

The European hedgehog was recently added to the United Kingdom Biodiversity Action Plan species list, which now comprises 1,149 different species that are considered threatened in the U.K.

The hedgehog joined the BAP list of species in need of conservation and greater protection because the European hedgehog's numbers have decreased by up to 50 percent in some areas of the U.K, said Fay Vass, chief executive of the British Hedgehog Preservation Society. The organization reports that tidier gardening and urbanization have contributed to the decline in population.

But organizations like the BHPS, based in Ludlow, Shropshire, and the People's Trust for Endangered Species, based in London, are determined to help keep wild European hedgehog numbers high.

The British Hedgehog Preservation Society, established in 1982, boasts a membership of about 11,000 people, and its recent efforts to educate the public on hedgehogs and conserve the species reflect its strong membership numbers.

A recent project the society took on was the rescue of hedgehogs from the Scottish island of Uist, where the non-native hedgehogs were being blamed for eating the eggs of ground-nesting birds and were consequently being killed, Vass said. The BHPS collected the hedgehogs and relocated them to the mainland, where they were released into the wild. With this system in place, the people of the island now regularly hand the European hedgehogs over to the society for relocation.

While the European hedgehog is a wild animal and not a domestic pet, Vass said that the species has a special place in the hearts of many people in the UK. This love is what leads to the success of the BHPS' numerous projects, including one of its most publicized accomplishments: The push to McDonald's to change its McFlurry milkshake lids.

"The original design [of the McFlurry cup] was causing a problem when littered [because] hedgehogs were getting stuck in the lid of the cup," Vass said.

After passers-by noticed wild European hedgehogs trapped in the lids — some alive, some dead — the BHPS spent more than five years pressing the fast-food restaurant giant to alter the size of the hole in the lid to prevent hedgehogs from becoming stuck inside. And its tireless efforts were met with success: The BHPS reports that after September 1, 2006, all McDonald's restaurants in the U.K. changed the McFlurry lids to comply with the society's requests.

The society's efforts don't stop there. The British Hedgehog Preservation Society also regularly maintains a list of hedgehog rehabilitators throughout the U.K. so that if people find an injured hedgehog, they know who to turn to, Vass said. The society also annually distributes information packets to veterinarians who treat hedgehogs and to schools to foster an interest in wildlife for the younger generations.

What drives the great love for the European hedgehog throughout the U.K.? Vass said the species is unique.

"It is a wild animal that people can see in their own gardens and, because its natural defense is to curl up in a ball, people actually get to see more than a glimpse in the corner of their eye, as with many species that run away," Vass said. "It is a firm favorite with gardeners, too, as it eats slugs and snails that can decimate plants."