

Release of recovered hedgehogs

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**IGEL
WISSEN**

kompakt

4

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Sick and injured hedgehogs can be found all year round; orphaned hoglets in the summer months. After recovery or rearing they all have to be „released immediately into freedom as soon as they can survive there independently“ (BNatSchG §45).

1 Requirements for release into the wild

Healthy hedgehogs without bacterial infections can be released into the wild. They should have a good appetite and defecate normally. If this is the case, then a low level of parasite infestation can be tolerated.

Orphaned, hand-raised hoglets without experience in nature should be prepared for life in the wild by means of an outdoor enclosure. They can almost always be released into the wild in their year of birth by the autumn. Young hedgehogs which could not be released due to the onset of winter and which are therefore to hibernate in human care should weigh no less than 600–700 grams when released. A juvenile that has only been taken from the wild for a short time, and is healthy and independent can however be released at a lower weight. Here, however, the current weather situation also plays a role.



2 Release timing

In good weather, hedgehogs can be released all year round. However, if it has been raining heavily for a longer period of time, reintroduction into the wild is not ideal. Under these conditions the hedgehog cannot collect dry nesting material. A period of dry weather on the other hand is no reason not to release a hedgehog. Ground beetles – the hedgehogs' main food – are active even in these conditions. If there is no natural water source nearby, watering places can be provided.

2.1 Release in spring

Spring, when the bushes and hedges are coming into leaf, is the time to release hedgehogs. In this mostly still cool season hedgehogs feed mainly on earthworms. You can see from the worm's earth mounds in the meadows that they are "within reach" of the hedgehogs.

Depending on location, climate and current weather forecast, hedgehogs can often be released as early as the end of March. The outside temperatures should be consistently mild, around 14° C during the day and not below 8° C at night. A healthy, well-fed hedgehog will however survive some cooler nights; even with ground frost. In the lowlands hedgehogs can generally be released one or two weeks earlier (end of March to mid-April) than in low mountain ranges (end of April at the latest).

2.2 The "Ice saints" – no longer an issue!

When hedgehog rescue was still in its infancy, a release weight was aimed for that was much too high (1000 grams and more!) and a release date that was much

too late, namely the “Ice saints”. These “Ice saints” occur around the middle of May. On these days there is sometimes a short, post-winter cold spell, this however does not affect a hedgehog. Under such conditions it retreats to its nest and sleeps through the cold days without serious weight loss.

It is much more stressful for the prickly friend if, despite good health, a comfortable weight, good weather (and, in males, rising testosterone levels), it is kept in captivity, possibly for weeks on end – until the “Ice saints”.

find their way around again very quickly.³

Hand-raised hedgehogs have no memory of where they were born, but whenever possible they also should be released back into the wild where they came from.

! Hedgehogs not released into the wild where they were found must reorient themselves, and are therefore at a disadvantage compared to their fellow wild living hedgehogs!

3 Choosing the right place to release into the wild

3.1 Reasons for releasing at the place found

In general, the best place to release them into the wild is where they were found. One can assume – exceptions aside - that the area where the hedgehog was found is a hedgehog-friendly habitat with sufficient shelter and food.



Hedgehogs have an excellent memory for places. They know how to slip through fences, detours to overcome obstacles, and places rich in food. So they

3.2 Unsuitable habitat for release

If the hedgehog is in immediate danger to life and limb at the place where it was found, for example due to construction work, it can't be brought back there. A new habitat must be found.

The fact that there are roads near to where the hedgehog was found is no reason not to put the hedgehog back there. In Germany there is almost no area left that is not crossed by roads. Hedgehogs wander far and wide when looking for food and mating partners. Every night they walk several hundred metres, often even a few kilometres. They cross roads quickly, and contrary to previous opinion, do not look for food there. But you should not release hedgehogs close to roads that are also busy at night.

3.3 Release into a new habitat

A release area should provide shelter and food. Small-scale mixed crops best fulfil these conditions.

Since most hedgehogs are found in human settlements or their peripheries, they can also be released there. Pre-

requisites are that for the most part the fences in the ⁴area are permeable; gardens are kept as natural as possible; and older bushes and trees are present. Parks and allotment gardens that are managed in a natural way are also recommended as release locations. The exception being if there are frequent noisy celebrations that take place nearby at night. In rural areas, farms with old outbuildings, trees and gardens are also considered suitable.



3.4 Unsuitable locations

Neither steep slopes nor forests are suitable as habitats for hedgehogs, nor are damp soils, riverbanks, floodplains, rocky soils and recultivation areas. Hedgehogs are not to be released near fox and badger dens or the nests of birds of prey. You should also avoid areas where free-roaming dogs, that may love to hunt, can often be found.

Furthermore, hedgehogs should not be released in places where Easter or other traditional fires are lit every year; or where construction projects are to be expected. An area radius of at least 100 m that is suitable and safe for hedgehogs should be guaranteed

4 Release into your own garden

4.1 Requirements

It is also possible that your own garden can be a good place to release a hedgehog – if the animal hadn't been found there anyway. For a garden to be suitable, there must be places for hedgehogs to shelter. Also foliage that can be used as nesting material is at most only partially removed, and there is no use of insecticides and herbicides.

Dangers must be mitigated: light shafts must be covered; cellar stairs, swimming pools and ponds need exit aids. Caution is needed when mowing. (see also leaflet 4.2 DANGER RECOGNIZED - DANGER AVERTED). Fences must be permeable because a garden only makes up a small part of a hedgehog's habitat.

4.2 Release into the garden

When releasing the hedgehog into the wild in your garden, prepare a place for it to live. This can be a wooden house filled with straw and/or hay. As hedgehogs seldom take such constructions as permanent homes, it is also sufficient to push nesting material (straw, hay, dry leaves) under bushes or into a thick hedge. The "roof" of leaves should be thick enough that it can't rain into the hedgehog's shelter. A wide board leaning at an angle against a house wall, filled with nesting material also serves the same purpose.

On a dry day at dusk put the hedgehog in its new nest and place its usual food so close to the entrance that the it has to walk through it when it leaves the nest. This is the best way to help the hedgehog to remember the location

of the feeding place. If it returns to the feeding place the next day and the day after next, it is recommended that you build a rainproof feeding house (see also Leaflet 4.3 SHELTERS AND FEEDING HOUSES). The feeding place can be stocked for a few days or a few weeks.



Hedgehogs are specially protected wild animals. Their freedom of movement is not to be hindered in any way!

5 Release into the wild where found/or in a new habitat

If the hedgehog is not released in your own garden then take it to the place where it is to be released; either where it was found or to the new habitat that you have previously scouted out. Take it there in the evening time.

Scouting trips looking for a release location while the hedgehog is with you should be avoided. Transporting should be as stress-free as possible: Do not slam car doors. Drive slowly around corners. In a sheltered place under a hedge or in the bushes, prepare a nest of hay (stands out less in the landscape than straw) and put out some food. For the sake of the environment do not leave boxes or food plates behind in the wild. If possible, continue to feed for a few more days. Maybe an animal lover living nearby can be found to take over this task.

6 Feeding after release

In order for a hedgehog to get used to its new life in the wild, and to the now more arduous task of searching for food,

it is initially provided with food every evening. In early spring, when the prey consists only of rather low calorie earthworms, the food ration can be larger than that for a hedgehog released in a more nutrition rich season – e.g. at the end of April. The food portion should always be just a supplement. The hedgehog must regard the food provided as just one of several food sources. The duration of the supplementary feeding depends on the time of release. A hedgehog released earlier in the year will be fed for longer than one released later. In most cases the hedgehog decides for itself when it no longer needs the supplementary feeding, i.e. it no longer takes the food.

In general, the supplementary feeding should last a maximum of 14 days; from mid-May onwards, no more supplementary feeding should be given under any circumstances.



7 Chances of survival once released into the wild

Wif a hedgehog disappears without trace after being released and does not touch the food provided, this is no reason to panic! Many hedgehogs enjoy their new freedom, wander around and are fully occupied with exploring, discovering and processing all the new

impressions. This is also the reason why almost all hedgehogs lose weight after being released into the wild. A weight loss of a hundred grams or more is quite normal. It makes a difference whether a hedgehog in captivity is only moving from the sleeping house to the feeding bowl, or whether it is active all night and wandering around!

Some long-term studies have shown that up to 80 % of hedgehogs released after hibernation in human care have been found. The chances of survival of such hedgehogs are therefore quite good and do not quite justify the fears of some hedgehog carers – or the criticism of opponents of hedgehog rescue.

8 Release into the wild by way of an outdoor enclosure

Of course, hedgehogs that are to be placed in an outdoor enclosure must be fully healthy. Bacteria and parasites can often remain infectious in the soil for years. An enclosure that is contaminated with pathogens cannot therefore be used in the following years.



8.1 The outdoor enclosure as a training camp

For hand-raised babies and youngsters who had had hardly any experience of

the outdoors before they were taken into care – i.e. weighed less than 200 grams – an outdoor enclosure serves primarily as a “training ground”. These animals had had little or no opportunity to look for natural food themselves before they came into human care. During a two-week stay in an outdoor enclosure, they can learn to catch worms and beetles themselves. In addition, they train their muscles, which will better prepare them for life in the wild. As the molluscs and insects in an enclosure are never enough to satiate a single hedgehog, you must continue to provide food as before.

8.2 Outdoor enclosures as a hibernation location prior to release

An outdoor enclosure can also be used as a hibernation place for hedgehogs that are healthy but cannot be released straight away due to the onset of winter. If your own garden is suitable as a place to release the hedgehogs, then open the enclosure after about two weeks, leave everything else in place and continue to feed them in the evening. It is not uncommon for the hedgehog to use its old sleeping house for some time and eat at the feeding place before it finally says goodbye.

8.3 Keeping hedgehogs separate in the outdoor enclosure

Hedgehogs must also be kept separately in outdoor enclosures. It is possible – see section 8.1 – to keep hedgehogs that are a few weeks old together; but this no longer applies when the young hedgehogs are a few months old and the enclosure is also to be used as a hibernation area. When kept in groups, hedgehogs often do not go into hibernation. Females often become pregnant far too early but

cannot rear their young (see also leaflet 4.8 HIBERNATION IN HUMAN CARE).

9 Size, location and construction of an outdoor enclosure

An outdoor enclosure for a single hedgehog should have a floor area of at least 4 m². If you intend to house litters, at least 2 m² should be added for each additional hedgehog.

Choose a grass-covered area shaded by trees or bushes. The more varied the vegetation, the more natural food the hedgehog will find.



The type of enclosure fence used depends on whether the enclosure is intended to serve for several years; or whether only a temporary structure is planned which will soon be dismantled. Depending on the situation, many different materials are suitable, such as wooden boards or close-meshed wire, which is attached to wooden or metal posts. The fence must be at least 50 cm high and – in order to prevent escape attempts – must be embedded in the ground to a depth of about 15 cm. Small openings in the fence allow insects and worms through. Wire fences can be

closed off on top with an inwardly protruding board. This is needed because of the “climbers” among the hedgehogs.

If you are worried about predators, cover the top of the enclosure with wooden frames covered with fine wire mesh, these can be removed for feeding and cleaning. Another alternative is outdoor lights with motion detectors set up in front of the enclosure. If the hedgehog is to be released into the area around the enclosure, build a door in the fence. A board embedded in the ground as a lower door stop prevents the hedgehog from burrowing through underneath.

10 Mobile enclosures with a slot-in system

A mobile slot-in system – especially suitable for hedgehog rescue centers – has a number of advantages as an outdoor enclosure

- Several enclosures can be set up during the release period.
- Slot-in enclosures can “move” without any problems.
- Mobile enclosures can be lent out and also put into temporary storage.

Boards are cut to the desired size and painted with environmentally friendly varnish. In order to prevent digging through, it is recommended to overlap the wire mesh at the bottom and to bury it. On stony ground the pegs should be made longer than specified. Despite all this, you must still check daily to see whether a hedgehog has dug hollows!

All reintroduction enclosures can be created in a natural way by placing them in a garden bed or around hedge clippings, piles of leaves or brushwood. Under no circumstances should you choose

an unprotected lawn area as a location - not even for short-term use (*Photo: Mobile enclosure set up for demonstration purposes only!*).



11 Sleeping house and feeding house in an outdoor enclosure

A sleeping house for the outdoor enclosure (floor space 30–40 cm, height 25–30 cm) is best made of wood. Straw (preferably oat straw without pointed awns), hay and leaves or a mixture of these materials are suitable as bedding. The nest material must be dry, clean and free of parasites. The sleeping house should be placed under bushes or shrubs so that it is shaded, and satisfies the hedgehog's desire to hide. The feeding place should be as far away from the sleeping house as possible. The hedgehog should be

encouraged to wander around, and the feeding area should not be soiled by bird droppings.

If unwanted visitors (cats, birds) are to be expected at the feeding place, an inverted fruit crate with two small entrances (approx. 10 x 10 cm), possibly weighted down with a stone, will suffice as a roof for the food. As an alternative you can build or buy a cat safe or bird safe feeding house (see also leaflet 4.3 SHELTERS AND FEEDING HOUSES).

In order to keep the area around the sleeping and feeding houses clean, they should be placed on garden slabs with a smooth surface. Sleeping and feeding houses must be kept scrupulously clean, feed and water bowls must be rinsed hot every day. Food should be put out at dusk and all leftovers removed the next morning.



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