

2012 – A terrible Year for Hedgehogs

2012 has been a terrible year for hedgehogs, in March just as the hedgehogs were coming out of hibernation (long winter sleep), we had one of the driest, warmest Marchs on record. Although we were all enjoying the sunshine and warmth, the poor hedgehogs were having a very hard time.

When hedgehogs come out of hibernation they need lots and lots of food and water to help them recover, a hedgehog can lose over one third of its body weight in hibernation. In long dry spells of weather there is no food or water to drink and hedgehogs often die of starvation and dehydration.

The females became pregnant in a poor condition, giving birth to weak litters. Just after the Mother hedgehog left the nest after 35-45 days (she does not stay with them after this time and often goes off to find another mate, the hoglets are usually fine, so long as they are together) the weather turned very wet and cold and the poor hoglets could not cope, they were often out during the day trying to find food, there was plenty as it was wet but they were really cold and too weak to get themselves going, the nest was wet and they could not get themselves warm and dry. (When a hedgehog gets cold he does not eat and unless he eats he will not get warm)

The other problem has been, an unusual parasite for hedgehogs (common in ducks) called Thorny Headed Worm this parasite is not usually found in hedgehogs especially hoglets. The parasite lives in and around the edge of water, eg streams, lakes and ponds and is picked up by slugs and carried to other animals which feed on the slugs. It is my theory (and that of my Vet) that as it has been so wet this year, these parasites are around the edge of large puddles which have been standing for some time and the slugs are carrying them to the hedgehogs. The young hedgehogs find the slugs round the puddles easy food to find and therefore this unusual problem has occurred.

One hospital reported that it lost 100 hoglets in a week which is heart breaking. The Thorny Headed Worm can be seen by the naked eye in the droppings as a white spec but does look like tape worm which is fairly common in young hoglets as it is carried by the Mother in her milk to her young but Thorny Headed Worms are very nasty and eat through the gut or bowel into the body cavity, it is only because I have such a supportive vet that this problem has been resolved. We are now not losing hoglets to the Thorny Head, we know what to look out for and although we lost several hedgehogs while we were trying to find out, they did not die without us learning a lot from them, with the use of a microscope, camera and email, I can get answers almost straight away from the vet, for things I do not recognize. The several hedgehogs which did die early on were all post-mortemed to confirm our theory.

The major problem now that it is warm and dry and has been for a long time, the hedgehogs are starving to death. Thorny Headed Worm problems is less about is still about, they really need food and water - Please help them.

Our next problem will be the winter, as Mother Hedgehogs are now having a second/third litter and these hoglets will not get to the required weight of 450g to get through the winter hibernation. So if you can feed the hedgehogs in your garden it will hopefully give them a fighting chance - there are only so many hedgehog hospitals and like with the Thorny Headed Worm problem we all were full and we had to close our doors, although most of us kept our phones on so we could perhaps help with advice and in my case I did swapping with the general public of a sick hedgehogs for one which just required some TLC. I do know that some hospitals have said they are now closing their doors for good, as this summer was just too much, and so upsetting, we all do our best and often in conjunction with jobs, hedgehog caring is a hobby for most of us and the pressure is sometimes just too much, so if you phone and we sound stressed, please be patient with us, as we may well be stressed and on two hourly feeds with hoglets and just back from having a hedgehog put to sleep, please remember it would be rare for your call to be the first or last of the day.