



What Can I Feed Visiting Wild Hedgehogs (that is good for them?).

I write this with the presumption that if you are reading it, you care greatly about the welfare of the hogs in your garden, and do not want to feed them things which are known to be harmful to their health. Please, on your part, also assume that this is written with the same aim, and with experience of caring for lots of hogs (hundreds), and also the shared experience of a huge UK network of wild hedgehog rehabilitators and wildlife hospitals.

This year, we have already had several admissions with metabolic bone disease (confirmed by a veterinary surgeon), both barely able to walk, and in pain. All of these were fed large amounts of mealworms.

So, in answer to the question, what can I feed visiting wild hogs, that is good for them..?

- > Its easy. 1) A hedgehog specific biscuit, or
- 2) Cat biscuits (any flavour will do*) or
- 3) Wet cat or dog food (any flavour will do*).

*please read further on for more details

It really IS as simple as that. So if you wanted a short answer, please dont feel you have to read any further 😊 For those of you with all the if's, but's, and maybe's, please do read on.

Wet Cat or Dog Food:

Again, people often ask me which one? And the answer is the same as above - it depends on your budget, and the flavour does not matter, for all the reasons already discussed above. We dont feed wet food to our wild garden hogs here. It gets extremely cold in winter and is at risk of freezing, and in warmer weather it is at risk of going off and attracting flies, which is the last thing visiting wildlife needs.

Still with me? Great. Read on for more answers to the common issues raised by the good folk who feed hedgehogs in their garden.....

But the hedgehogs will only eat mealworms!

Okay. This has to be the most common thing I hear, usually in a frustrated despairing tone..! Let me ask you something. Would you feed your child nothing, and I mean nothing, but chocolate? No. What about if they had a tantrum and refused other food? Im guessing still no. Thats because you have some common sense and know that regardless of the fact they love it, a diet of chocolate is not good for them.

Please apply that same common sense to the wild hedgehogs in your garden. Yes, they love mealworms. Yes, if you've been feeding loads of mealworms and you change to a proper, nutritionally complete diet, they are likely to have a tantrum. But they WILL EAT WHEN THEY ARE HUNGRY! And yes, I do know this because every year, we admit ill hogs, from members of the public who insist they will not eat anything apart from mealworms. And every single one of those hogs, when mealworms have not been on offer, have caved in and eaten the food available. For some thats taken a day, some two, some three or four days.

BUT if you are STILL offering a bowl of mealworms alongside other food, of course they are going to eat the mealworms and leave the food (think of the child with chocolate!). So PLEASE ditch the (expensive) mealworms, so that they only have healthy food on offer. And wait. They will come back and eat.

or make one VERY cheaply from a plastic underbed storage box....

<https://thehedgehog.co.uk/feeding-hedgehogs/how-to-stop-cats-dogs-and-foxes-stealing-the-hedgehogs-food/>

But cat food/hedgehog food/dog food isn't their natural diet!

Neither are mealworms!! Or peanuts, or biscuits, or cake, or wagon wheels, or any of the other, frankly ridiculous things which people feed wild animals.

However, cat and dog food is nutritionally balanced and complete, and will NOT cause skeletal deformities, raging tooth decay, nutritional deficiencies or spine and fur loss - all of which occur with an inappropriate diet.

Mealworms do not exist in the wild. Nor do any of the items above...

So what is a hedgehogs natural diet?

Hedgehogs are not insectivores as many people think. Studies have shown they are omnivorous. These studies have analysed faeces and stomach contents of wild hogs, and food preference trials in captive wild hedgehogs. The main bulk of the diet is caterpillars, beetles, millipedes, earthworms and earwigs. Slugs form a very small percentage of their diet (and transmit lungworm). They also eat frogs, toads, small mammals, carrion, and eggs. It is thought that any fruit and vegetable matter is eaten incidentally (i.e. attached to their food) rather than intentionally. Diet will vary with habitat - and available species.

The aim of providing supplemental feeding is not to try and replicate their natural diet - YOU CANT. But you CAN provide a nutritionally balanced food to support their natural diet.

First, more information about what you CAN safely feed them as above...

Hedgehog specific biscuits:

Here, we feed our visiting wildies with a mix of two things: Ark Wildlife hedgehog biscuits, and Ark Wildlife hedgehog mix. This doesnt get eaten by the neighbourhood cats, the hedgehogs like it (please bear in mind that it WILL take them a few days to get used to a change in food), and the wild birds finish off any bits leftover. I have no affiliation with Ark wildlife, its simply that our wild hogs will eat it. There are other alternatives available. However, I have confidence that Ark wildlife have done their research and formulated a nutritionally complete and appropriate food - it was originally developed for hedgehog rescue centres and wildlife hospitals.

Hedgehog biscuits are also good for their teeth, do not freeze in winter, or go off and attract flies in summer.

Cat Biscuits:

People often ask me which one? That depends entirely on you and your budget. We prefer to feed a good quality cat biscuit, (we use cat biscuits for our rescue hogs) and use Royal Canin Kitten, which we have never had a hedgehog refuse. It does not need to be a kitten biscuit (unless you know you have some very young hogs visiting just out of their nest) - cat biscuits are small enough in size for hogs to manage. The flavour does not matter. I repeat, the flavour does not matter. Chicken, fish, rabbit, duck... its all protein just the same.

The "dont feed hedgehogs fish flavoured food" is an old wives tale which gets endlessly circulated on the internet. And for those who say "but fish isn't a natural diet for a hedgehog", how many hedgehogs have you seen hunting chickens, rabbits or ducks...? Rescues up and down the land feed cat and dog food which contains fish. As far as I know, no hedgehogs have turned into snorkelling fish stalkers in the local ponds.... 😊

Cat biscuits are also good for their teeth, do not freeze in winter, or go off and attract flies in summer.

So, whats this about mealworms and metabolic bone disease?

Food contains calcium and phosphorus. The body of any mammal, (and others) needs blood levels of calcium and phosphorous to be correct to prevent illness. If too much phosphorous is eaten, calcium is taken from the body's calcium stores (bones) to maintain the correct blood ratio of calcium and phosphorous. This causes bones to become poor density, soft, bendy and at worst deformed, and results in a hedgehog being barely able to walk due to pain, and at high risk of fractures.

Every day I, and other rescues, see endless photos online of people feeding bowls of mealworms to their wild hogs. Mealworms (live and dry) are very high in phosphorous and low in calcium. Imagine a pair of scales - the amount of phosphorus consumed must not be more than the amount of calcium - to prevent bone loss AT LEAST as much calcium must be consumed, preferably more. So all these hogs being fed loads of mealworms are getting lots and lots of phosphorous and hardly any calcium. This is causing awful bone disease. This is happening because people are feeding their wild hogs diets high in mealworms, sunflower hearts and peanuts. All have very high levels of phosphorus and hardly any calcium. They are not a necessary part of a wild hogs diet, please avoid feeding them. You are feeding your wild hogs because you care about them - care enough to feed them nutritionally balanced food 😊

But if I feed proper food, the cats/dogs/fox/(insert relevant animal as appropriate) will eat it!

As I said previously, when we were feeding the wildies with cat food, yes, the neighbourhood cats were very happy 😊 I didn't want to have an enclosed feeder, so swapped to feeding the ark wildlife biscuits and hedgehog mix, which the local cats dont touch (and they were pretty miffed!). You have two choices - feed a hedgehog biscuit/mix the cats wont touch such as Arks, OR place the food in a cat proof feeder. You can buy these (riverside woodcraft do a great feeding station):

www.riversidewoodcraft.co.uk/hedgehogs/485-hedgehog-eco-feeding-station.html

But why cant I feed dried fruit, sultanas, cake, biscuits, wagon wheels, etc etc..? They like it!

So does the child who only wants to eat chocolate... but seriously - rescues are admitting an ever increasing volume of hogs with severe dental disease, even in young hogs. How severe you ask? One rescue had a hog with such severe dental disease, the jawbone had become infected and crumbled. Hogs cannot clean their teeth. Sweet sugary foods cause dental decay in other mammals too. PLEASE do not feed these things.

But I like giving them a treat!

They are wild animals. The concept of treats is a human one, very tied into human emotion. Wild animals do not understand treats, they will eat what they are given. The best way of treating your wild hogs is to feed them safe, nutritionally balanced and appropriate food. But the gardener/ my neighbour/someone on the telly (insert appropriate term here) says its fine to feed them mealworms (etc)!

Ask yourself what they know about the care of wild hogs? How much research have they done? Sadly there are still some less enlightened and up to date rescues who tell people to feed these items. All I can say to you, is that the above information is EVIDENCE BASED, and supported by some of the largest and most experienced rescues and wildlife hospitals in the UK.

Lastly, if you've made it this far, thanks for reading, and for caring about our native hoggies.

Lynda
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