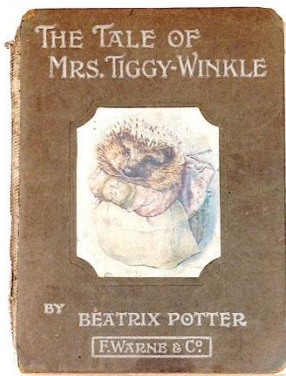


Whatever happened to Mrs Tiggy-Winkle?



Picture this: It's 10pm on a warm summer's evening and there I am, walking the length of our garden, ears pricked up and listening intently for any sound of rustling in the bushes and undergrowth on either side of our lawn. I walk down the edge the lawn on one side and then repeat the procedure walking up towards our house on the other side.

I have a torch in my hand, with a charming assistant (my wife) ready to investigate should any of the sounds appear to be moving.

We repeat this exercise once or twice a week during the summer months. Our neighbours must think that either we have got mixed up in some religious cult holding a late-night ritual, that we are just plain eccentric, or that there are intruders in our garden at regular intervals.

The truth is somewhat more prosaic: we are looking for hedgehogs.

We have lived in our house for more than 30 years and, when our kids were young, we would search for hedgehogs most evenings in summer when the weather was warm, and occasionally we would even let them stay up late for a bit of hedgehog-spotting. Then, we didn't have to wait long to see one.

Our kids have long gone and, sadly, so have the hedgehogs. We still look for them, but now we are fortunate if we see one a year. Last summer was a "bumper" year – we saw two! So, what has become of Mrs (or Mr) Tiggy-Winkle?

The sad truth is that hedgehogs have become an endangered species. In fact, they are listed in the top six of the UK's most at-risk animals. Their numbers are declining at a frighteningly rapid rate. In the 1950s it was estimated there were around 30 million hedgehogs in the UK. By the time the Nineties arrived, this figure had shrunk to around 1.5 million. Since then, it is believed, the total has fallen by a further 40%.

Extinctions in the wild can happen at an alarming rate. Here today, gone tomorrow, comparatively speaking. Before we realise it, it's too late. There can be no better example than the demise of the passenger pigeon, whose flocks in North America once comprised millions, sometimes billions, of individual birds. By 1890, the flocks had dwindled to a few dozen birds. In 1914, the last passenger pigeon died in a zoo. Hunting and disruption of the passenger

pigeons' nesting grounds by industrial and railroad expansion brought about their rapid end.

Of course, no one hunts hedgehogs, so their demise is harder to explain. But, as is so often the case, a whole variety of factors chip away at a species' ability to survive. The hedgehog is a case in point.

The reasons for their decline are not known for certain, but some have been identified by the British Hedgehog Preservation Society. They include the continued intensification of agriculture, the loss of habitat in urban areas, predation by badgers and the huge numbers killed by the ever-increasing volume of traffic of our roads.

“The loss of habitat in urban areas” – that’s an interesting one. Then, just the other day, it occurred to me that I may be guilty in that respect. Six years ago, I had a new 6ft high fence erected around my garden, with concrete gravel boards. No hedgehog could get through that. The only possible route of entry is a 3ft-stretch of hedge where the fence panels end on one side of my garden. Before that, Mrs Tiggy-Winkle could gain access to the Joneses’ garden anywhere along a 120-ft stretch of tumbledown chicken-wire fencing.

I’m guilty but so are millions of other homeowners. Lawns have been replaced by patios, concrete parking areas or decking. The increasing desire for privacy has led to more and more gardens being turned into inaccessible “fortresses...” at least as far as Mrs Tiggy-Winkle is concerned.

I can’t pull down all my fences, so what can I do to give Mrs Tiggy-Winkle a chance?

Here are 10 tips from the British Hedgehog Preservation Society to make your garden more hedgehog-friendly. Not all will be feasible, but some will, whatever size your garden, assuming you have one.

1. Link your garden with Hedgehog Highways.
2. Make your pond safe with a ramp.
3. Create a wild corner in your garden.
4. Remove any netting or litter in your garden.
5. Put out food and water.
6. Stop using chemicals,
7. Check carefully before strimming vegetation.
8. Be careful with bonfires.
9. Make a home for hedgehogs.
10. Become a Hedgehog Champion

No one garden is enough for a hedgehog. Hedgehogs need neighbourhoods of linked-up gardens to survive. Sadly, this is easier said than done, but if we all created a “passageway” to allow hedgehogs to come and go, they would be in with a fighting chance of survival.

The People’s Trust for Endangered Species and the British Hedgehog Preservation Society are running a joint initiative called Hedgehog Street, with the aim of improving gardens to make neighbourhoods more hedgehog-friendly.

Well, summer’s coming, we hope, and I shall be out there again, torch in hand, listening for Mrs Tiggy-Winkle or her offspring. I will at least make sure that she can get under the hedge at the bottom of our garden. Fingers crossed for more success this year, though it’s depressing to think that the statistics are likely to prove otherwise. Let’s hope not.

* For more information, click on www.britishhedgehogs.org or www.hedgehogstreet.org.

