
The hedgehog, the forest animal that might not really live there (anymore)

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Résumé

Tradition links European hedgehogs (*Erinaceus sp.*) to trees. They have been said to carry tree fruits on their quills (Pliny, *Physiologos*) and modern figurines show them holding/carrying mushrooms or leaves. Moreover, tales, folklore, children's literature, and mainstream books clearly present the hedgehog as a forest animal

Studies about hedgehogs' ecology consistently show contradictory results about whether they like forested areas or not. They are difficult to spot in tree-covered areas, leading to a sur-representation of country- or peri-urban-found individuals in studies. Numerous hard-to-isolate characteristics (density, paths, clearings, deciduous/non-, undergrowth) also explain variations. Geographical distribution of hedgehogs nevertheless follows that of forests (Morris & Berthoud). The latter thinks that they mainly hibernate in woodland.

Our anthropological researches show that hedgehog carers and enthusiasts consider forests as being this animal's original habitat and "lost paradise". They often release rescued hedgehogs at the edge of the forest, so that they can disappear (almost morph) into its original environment. They explain that forests have been replaced by hedges and orchards, which are being destroyed by urbanization. Suburban gardens therefore became hedgehogs' last haven.

Our examination of contemporary children's stories shows that a frequent theme is a hedgehog exploring, leaving and/or returning to the forest. By leaving "home", breaking its own immobility and challenging natural cycles (seasons, sleep), a hedgehog puts itself in danger. But, by doing this, it becomes wiser, more cultured or finds a new ideal place (usually a garden) to live.

All these somewhat contradicting points could be united within one hypothesis. Tales, folklore and children's stories could be an ethnohistorical record of hedgehogs' past life as a forest animal. That the hedgehog historically took refuge in woods (the carers point of view) would have been to escape hunting and/or human destruction – like other forest animals are said to have done. But, it has now become safe(r) to live in man-controlled areas, as displayed in contemporary children stories and evidenced by the high densities of hedgehogs found in peri-urban areas by scientific studies. Going out of the forest, hedgehogs would be establishing a new true commensal "civilised" relationship with humans.

Mots-Clés: habitat, population densities, habitat change, social representation of forests, symbolic of trees and forests

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