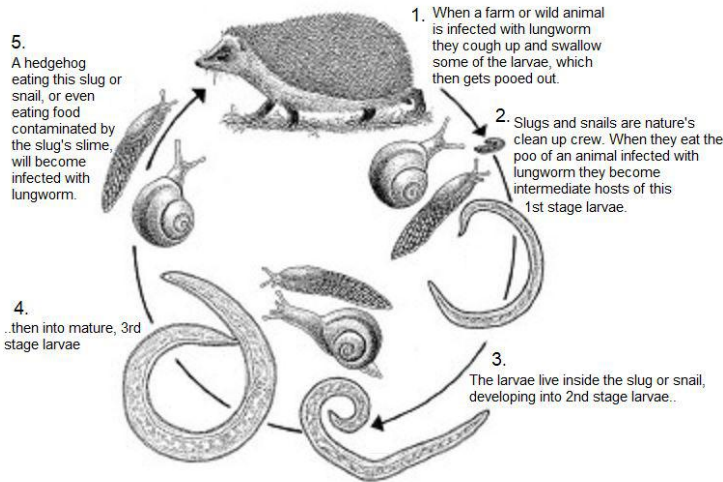


We need to talk about slugs

Ask 10 people what hedgehogs eat, and 8 out of 10 will say slugs and snails. Right?

But it's so wrong. A hedgehog's natural diet consists mostly of caterpillars and beetles. Aside from the odd experimental tasting by juveniles, hedgehogs avoid slugs and snails - which is just as well or the species would have died out decades ago. Slugs and snails are the intermediate hosts of lungworm; a parasite that will rapidly kill a hedgehog if not treated.



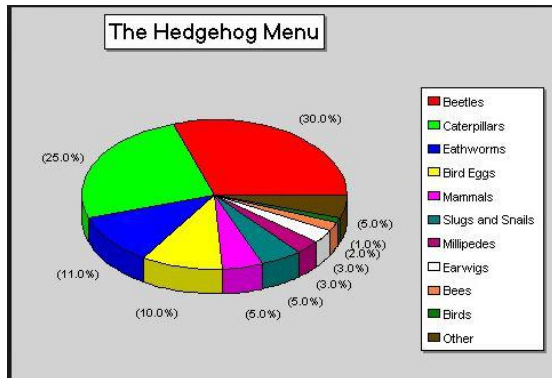
The life cycle of the lungworm parasite

But if there is no other food available and a hedgehog is desperate and starving, eating anything will ease the pain of starvation - and slugs are always around in abundance.

It's a desperate, short term solution, because instead of dying of starvation they will die of parasite invasion.

An animal doesn't even have to eat the slug or snail to get lungworm, just consuming something that has been moved over and covered in slime is enough - sheep get lungworm from eating grass which has been in the path of a slug.

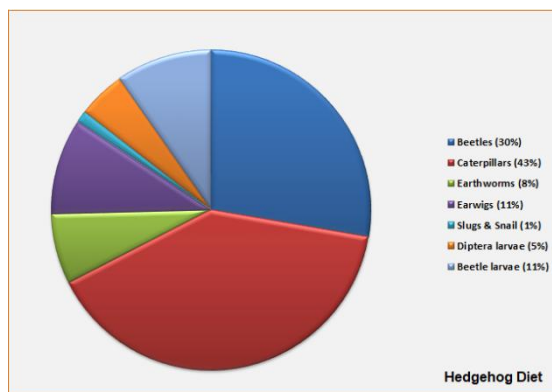
The research into the hedgehog's diet most often quoted (and still, shockingly, taught at university) is by Yalden, conducted back in 1976.



It was terribly flawed even then (for example, his conclusion that 10% of a hog's diet is bird eggs failed to account for the fact that the stomachs of the hogs he examined were lured into traps - baited with bird eggs!).

But even though this was 45 years ago, a time when we were still innocently killing hedgehogs by feeding them bread and milk and knowledge of the hedgehog was limited, it's clear slugs and snails accounted for a tiny proportion of their diet.

A later study, using less barbaric means, conducted by Grosshans in 1983, revealed the percentage of slugs and snails to be more like 1%.



So if they don't relish eating slugs and snails, and everyone who has done any research into the components of a hedgehog's diet has proved this, why is this tiny, negligible part of a hedgehog's diet always mentioned first? It's like listing the human diet and starting with flies, or cat hair.

The answer is for the same reason people wrongly think hedgehogs are full of fleas* - folklore.

Folklore and myth are ways in which us humans have made sense of the natural world, in the absence of knowledge, for thousands of years. From thinking thunder was the gods being angry, to believing that cats have nine lives.

*Ringworm is a common ailment among hedgehogs as this fungus can live in the soil, where hedgehogs forage (which is why it's mostly seen on the nose). Ringworm is extremely itchy, so even healthy hedgehogs whose immune system is keeping the ringworm in check will very often be seen scratching. But before this was common knowledge, the scratching was assumed to be because of fleas - because our only frame of reference was our pets, and that's why they would scratch as intensely. And so the myth was born - all hedgehogs are alive with fleas! (In reality it's actually pretty rare for a hog to have fleas, and even then it would only be because they were sick).

And so it is with slugs and snails. Long before garden lighting was available, when even street lighting was restricted to urban streets, our nights were dark. And the places where hedgehogs would roam and forage were darker still. Hedgehogs were rarely seen - except when they were sick and had come out in the day time.

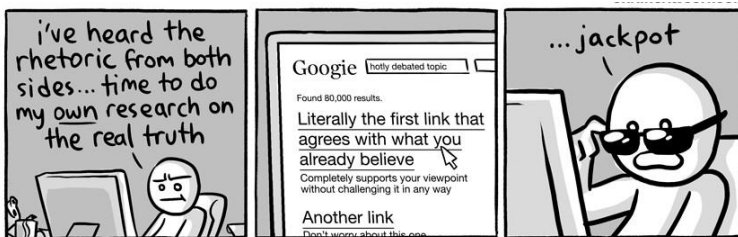


And these sick, usually starving hedgehogs would of course be seen eating slugs and snails. So in the absence of knowledge to the contrary, it was assumed that slugs and snails were the main, preferred diet of hedgehogs.

As our love affair with these charming gentle creatures grew, so did the myth; children's picture books depicted the hedgehog with a snail - one became synonymous with the other - reinforcing the myth. **By the time researchers proved that slugs and snails were not top of the hog's menu, and in fact were at the very bottom, it was too late** - the Illusory Truth Effect had taken hold.



The Illusory Truth Effect is a quirk of the human mind. Our brains make sense of a new experience by comparing it to stored data; our previous experiences. Which means we are more likely to believe something we have seen before, than new information. Repeated exposure turns an idea into a belief. Politicians and cult leaders use this tactic all the time - repeating false information so many times that it ends up being believed.



And so the myth of the hedgehog and the slug gets perpetuated. It's believed and repeated by every nature TV programme, and mindlessly copied onto every website - sites we trust to give us accurate information. Reinforcing our comforting confirmation bias.

You may think this myth is harmless, but it's actually killing hedgehogs every day that it is believed. The majority of a hedgehog's diet is caterpillars and beetles. Moths and butterflies need food and cover to lay their eggs, which turn into caterpillars, which also need to eat. So when we cut down long grasses, wild flowers, 'weeds', ivy and stinging nettles, or moan that the council hasn't cut back the undergrowth beside a path or around a recreation ground, or mow the grass neatly in the park, we are destroying the habitat and food for the caterpillars. The same goes for beetles and their larvae.

If the caterpillars and beetles have no food and die, it means there's nothing for hedgehogs to eat. We are literally starving our hedgehogs out of existence. But this tragic decline can be halted - if we all change our ways a little and let nature open up its larder again. And help out in the meantime with supplementary feeding.



But how can we convince those 8 out of 10 people that our hedgehogs are dying of starvation and need our help, when everywhere they turn they read that hedgehogs eat slugs? It's high time this myth was busted.

So every time you see this myth purported as fact, every site you visit that lists slugs and snails as an important part of a hedgehog's diet, don't just snigger at their ignorance - tell them. Correct them; write an email or post on their social media. You will save lives.

Get this myth relegated back to where it belongs - in the dark ages.