



Wildlife

Living with *badgers*

About badgers

European badgers are widespread throughout Britain, except in northern parts of Scotland and on some islands. They are particularly common in south-west England.

Badgers have short, extremely muscular limbs with strong, non-retractable claws on their broad feet – highly adapted for efficient digging and spending long periods below ground in their underground setts. They can climb fairly well up tree trunks and netting, and can also swim. They feed mainly on earthworms but are highly adaptable and, depending on the food available, will also take other invertebrates (such as beetles, wasps and bees), rodents (such as mice and voles), rabbits, cereals, fruit and bulbs.

As urban areas expand, built-up areas get closer to where badgers are living. Badgers have a marked preference for areas of mixed habitat with deciduous and mixed woodland, copses and pastures on soils in which it is easy to dig their setts. However, badgers may also enter gardens as they move between setts or look for food. They may even set up home in secluded areas in gardens or on recreational land, such as golf courses.

Badgers are nocturnal and crepuscular (active at dusk and dawn), but cubs may be seen foraging during daylight if food is scarce in the summer. Most badgers in Britain live in social groups of approximately five to 12 individuals – comprising male (boar) and female (sow) adults, sub-adults and cubs. Each social group defends a territory that will usually include more than one sett. Territorial activity is greater in early spring during the mating season. Both sexes will also make temporary visits to neighbouring groups in late winter and/or early spring, probably to seek out potential mates.

Each social group normally has one litter of one to five cubs each year. Mating can occur during most of the year, but the fertilised egg does not usually develop until winter. Badgers do not hibernate but spend far less time above ground during cold weather in December and January. Most cubs are born in early February, sometimes earlier. They stay below ground for eight to ten weeks - venturing out from late April. Weaning begins at about 12 weeks. Most cubs are weaned by early May – almost all by July.

A national survey of badgers in 1997 estimated that there were about 50,000 social badger groups in Britain – containing around 310,000 adult badgers. In areas of good habitat there can be as many as 25 adult badgers in each square kilometre with a territory being as small as 30 hectares, but in marginal habitat less than one adult badger per square kilometre with a territory of over 150 hectares.

At the beginning of the twentieth century badgers were fairly uncommon following a prolonged history of persecution by trapping (including snaring), shooting, badger digging and baiting. With a decline in the number of gamekeepers, the population started to recover. The introduction of legislation to protect badgers has helped this recovery, but they are still persecuted. Nowadays road traffic accidents are the greatest single cause of badger mortality in Britain. A survey of the badger population and the mortality rates of badgers at two long-term study sites concluded in 1992 that approximately 50,000 badgers are killed on our roads each year (>50% of all known deaths).

Your questions answered

Should I put food out for badgers in my area? If so, what?

Providing supplementary food, in limited amounts, can be beneficial to badgers. Suitable foods include tinned cereal-based dog food with lightly cooked meat, cheese, some peanuts and fruits of the season. This food can help to increase the chance of cubs surviving in hot, dry summers and also help all badgers during long cold, frosty periods - when natural food is in short supply. If food is provided on a regular basis, possibly by a number of local householders, there is a risk that the badgers will then be attracted to the gardens. Problems can arise if other neighbours do not welcome the badgers and may lead to someone taking action against the animals. Care must also be taken to avoid the badgers becoming dependent on handouts when food is put out every night in large amounts. In extreme situations, the social group may become larger than the territory would support naturally. It is also not advisable to provide food if it encourages badgers to cross a busy road.

How can I deter badgers from using my garden?

The most humane and long-term solution to discourage badgers from your garden is to remove or prevent access to what attracts them to the area. For further advice on deterring badgers, the contact details for your Local Badger Group can be obtained from The Badger Trust on tel: 08458 287878 or www.badger.org.uk.

Remove access to any potential food supplies

- Only provide food for wild birds on bird tables or in feeders and clear away windfall fruit.
- Use expanding straps to securely seal dustbins.
- Use either electrified flexinet fencing (pegged down along its length to prevent badgers squeezing underneath) or two strands of electrified Polywire at 7.5-20cm above ground around vegetable patches etc.

Deter badgers from the garden or limit access

- Erect a strong chain link badger-proof fence around the garden (or vulnerable crops) that is more than 1.25m high. The base needs to be buried into the ground by at least 30cm and extended at right angles underground for 50cm - facing outwards from the exclusion area. Badger gates can also be set into the fencing to allow badgers to use their established paths through areas of the garden. An advisory leaflet from Natural England for householders (TIN004) can be obtained by calling their Wildlife Management and Licensing Service on 0845 601 4523, or by downloading from the Publications section of their website (www.naturalengland.org.uk).
- Unfortunately, there are currently no repellents specifically approved under the Control of Pesticides Regulations for use against badgers. It is illegal to use any substance to deter badgers that has not been approved for such use.

How can I stop badgers digging up my garden?

Badgers may dig up lawns for insect larvae (particularly leatherjackets) or for a latrine that may be dug to mark their territories. However, this behaviour is largely seasonal. Latrines are most conspicuous in the spring and to a lesser extent in the autumn. Digging lawns for leatherjackets and grubs is most pronounced in the late autumn and early spring. As this damage is limited to certain periods of the year, many gardeners find it easier to tolerate the nuisance rather than trying to exclude badgers from their garden. If some form of action is still necessary, the application of an appropriate pesticide might be considered to remove the insects that are attracting the badgers to the lawn. Alternatively, biological control products containing tiny predatory nematode worms are available online, from garden centres or by mail order for use against insects such as leatherjackets. These are selective and environmentally safer but both treatments will remove this food source from birds and other animals. Alternative methods to deter badgers or prevent access to gardens are given above.

Are badgers protected?

Yes. The Protection of Badgers Act 1992 makes it an offence to kill or injure a badger (except under licence); cruelly ill-treat a badger; use certain prohibited firearms; dig for a badger; damage or destroy a badger sett or obstruct access to it, or disturb a badger in it; cause a dog to enter a badger sett; and tag or mark any badger (except under licence). The Act permits the granting of a licence to take or kill badgers, or to interfere with setts in certain circumstances - such as for the purpose of preventing serious damage to land, crops or other property. In England the licensing authority is Natural England and in Wales it is either the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) (for development operations) or the Environment Department of the Welsh Assembly Government (for forestry operations).

An occupied badger sett may also be found on the proposed site for a road or housing. To avoid later problems, developers should carry out surveys with the local badger group, wildlife trust or ecological consultant before seeking outline planning permission. Mitigation methods – such as providing tunnels under roads, artificial setts, road-side reflectors, badger gates and using fencing (see above) – can also help to reduce the impact such developments have on the local badger population.

What should I do if I see someone digging near a badger sett?

Anyone suspecting badger digging should contact the RSPCA and/or the police wildlife crime officer. Illegal badger digging is widespread in the UK, but is more common in some regions. Anyone wanting to dig a trench or pit within 20 metres of the nearest entrance to a badger sett may require a licence and should first contact the relevant licensing authority i.e. Natural England, or in Wales, the Countryside Council for Wales (for development operations) or the Welsh Assembly Government (for forestry operations). The Protection of Badgers Act 1992 permitted recognised hunts to temporarily block the entrance to a sett at certain times before the hunt and using certain methods. This exemption was removed by the Hunting Act 2004.

To report badger digging or baiting, or an injured or sick badger to the RSPCA
please ring the 24-hour cruelty and advice line 0300 1234 999