

Badgers



Badger: *Meles meles*

Distribution: widespread throughout most of Britain and Ireland; commonest in the south and west; scarce in East Anglia, parts of Scotland, urban Midlands.

Habitat: mainly deciduous woodland but also farmland, some large urban gardens and coastal cliffs. Life-span: up to about 15 years

Size: Male:- head and body up to 76cm (30in); tail 15cm (6in). Female smaller.

Description: stocky grey body, short tail; distinctive black-and-white striped head with small white tipped ears.

Food: omnivore (both meat and plant eater); earthworms are the main food; also beetles, slugs, wasp grubs, frogs, young rabbits and mice, fruit, bluebell bulbs.

Badgers are one of the most popular and well-known British mammals. Some places have been named after them, such as Brockenhurst in Hampshire and Brockhall in Northamptonshire - brocc is an old English word

for badger.

Badger Habits

Territory: badgers live in large burrow systems called setts. A sett is usually dug in sloping ground in a wood or copse bordering pastureland. Some setts have been used for over 100 years by generations of badgers and may have more than 40 entrances. The underground tunnels may be up to 30m long. Tunnels are on different levels, about 100cm from the surface. At the end of a tunnel is a chamber, used for sleeping or breeding. A badger community normally consists of several adult boars (males) and sows (females) together with one or two litters of cubs - up to 15 animals in total. A community's territory may be 40 - 50 hectares (1 hectare = 2 football pitches) in size.

Daily life: badgers are nocturnal and emerge from their setts soon after dusk, sniffing the air for danger before going about their activities. They are very clean animals and always deposit their droppings in shallow pits some distance from the sett. Bedding material is also changed frequently. Straw, bracken, dry leaves etc. are gathered between the forepaws and the badger shuffles backwards to the sett entrance.

Near the sett there is usually a "scratching tree", engraved with sets of parallel claw marks. Sharpening claws keep them in good condition for digging.

Before going off to forage for food along well-used paths throughout their territory, badgers may spend some time around their sett. Half-grown cubs enjoy playing with each other, chasing, jumping and tumbling - the adults often join them. They like to groom each other too. Badgers in the same group recognise each other by scent; one badger "musks" another by backing onto it with its tail raised to secrete a strong-smelling liquid from a gland under its tail.

Winter: during the autumn, badgers eat as much as they can, laying down a lot of fat under the skin, increasing their weight by up to 6%. This helps them to survive the winter. They do not hibernate but spend the coldest weather sleeping in their setts, living mainly off their fat.

Breeding: badgers may mate in any month between February and October but the fertilised egg does not start developing until December. This is called delayed implantation. The cubs are born about eight weeks after implantation, from mid-January to mid-March. There are usually two or three cubs in a litter and to begin with they are blind and have silky, greyish-white fur. They remain underground until they are 8 weeks old and weaning starts at 12 weeks of age. Some cubs stay with the family group and others leave to find new

territories. Females are ready to breed at 12-15 months, males take longer, usually maturing by the age of two.

Badgers and Man

Although the occasional 'rogue' may develop a liking for poultry, on the whole badgers do more good than harm. However, man has persecuted the badger for many decades for a variety of reasons. In the early 1970s some badgers, mainly in south-west England, were found to be infected with the bacteria that cause tuberculosis in cattle. The Ministry of Agriculture thought it was likely that badgers could transmit the disease to cattle; as a result thousands of setts were gassed to try and stamp out the disease. Tuberculosis is still affecting cattle in some areas, particularly in the south-west of England, and no-one really knows if badgers are entirely to blame.

Badgers are still in danger from human activities. There are possibly around 250,000 adult badgers in Britain, a number not enabling them to qualify as an endangered species. About 105,000 cubs are born each year but many of these do not manage to live for more than 3 years; 12-15 years is their normal life-span.

Although both the badger and its sett are protected by law, this does not prevent the death of 40,000 badgers killed by road traffic every year. Badgers follow the same paths all their lives, so if a road is built across their path they will continue to use it. On some new roads where an established badger path is known to exist, special badger tunnels have been built underneath the road.

An increasing threat to badgers these days is the illegal, extremely cruel 'sport' of badger-digging and baiting. People caught injuring badgers or digging them out of their setts are prosecuted and fined but it is very difficult to catch them in the act. They act under the cover of darkness, digging out the badger with the help of aggressive terriers. The captured, injured badger may be taken away in a sack for baiting, the horrific fights between dogs and badger often take place in the back of vans. The badger is a formidable fighter and the unscrupulous diggers seem to enjoy watching the unfortunate animals fight to the death. Fining culprits is not usually effective since many of them are unemployed and do not always have the money to pay the fine. The most effective punishment is to take away the diggers and dogs and disqualify them from being able to keep any in the future. It is estimated that 10,000 badgers a year suffer at the hands of badger-diggers, particularly in Wales and the north of England.

Protecting the Badger

There are more than 70 badger groups around Britain. These groups survey the setts in their area and try to keep an eye on them, looking out for signs of interference. If you suspect that a sett is being disturbed by people, you should never approach them. Record any vehicle registration number and descriptions from a safe distance and contact the police, RSPCA or the local badger group.

Badger groups also co-operate with the Department of Transport who arrange for a tunnel to be constructed if a sett is proved to be in the line of a planned road.

If you would like to find out more about your local badger group, then write to: The Badger Trust, 2b Inworth Street, London, SW11 3EP. Tel: 020 7228 6444 www.nfbg.org.uk

All content copyright of YPTE.

