

LEGISLATION

Under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, badgers are fully protected in Northern Ireland. By law:

- IT IS ILLEGAL TO POSSESS A BADGER, WHETHER DEAD OR ALIVE, OR PART OF A DEAD BADGER WHICH WAS COME BY ILLEGALLY
- IT IS ILLEGAL FOR ANY PERSON TO INTENTIONALLY KILL, INJURE OR TAKE ANY BADGER
- IT IS ILLEGAL TO DAMAGE, DESTROY OR OBSTRUCT ACCESS TO ANY BADGER SETT OR TO DISTURB ANY BADGER WHILE IT IS OCCUPYING THE SETT

There are certain exceptions to these regulations, for example, tending a sick badger (see next section). In certain circumstances, the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland may issue licences for activities which would otherwise be illegal, such as photography or damaging a sett when this cannot be avoided.

INJURED BADGERS

Badgers are shy animals that normally avoid human contact. However, they are powerful animals and when injured may be very dangerous. NEVER TOUCH OR APPROACH AN INJURED BADGER. Instead, contact the USPCA, who will be able to send out someone who is trained to handle and care for badgers.

ORGANISATIONS TO CONTACT

Mammal Society
Baltic Exchange Buildings
21 Bury Street
LONDON
EC3A 5AU

National Federation of Badger Groups
16 Ashdown Gardens
Sanderstead
South Croydon
SURREY
CR2 9DR

Royal Society for Nature Conservation
The Green
Nettleham
LINCOLN
LN2 2NR

Ulster Wildlife Trust
3 New Line
CROSSGAR
Co Down
BT30 9EP

Please enclose a stamped addressed envelope when writing for information.

FURTHER READING

Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland (1988) THE WILDLIFE LAW AND YOU. Publisher: HMSO, Belfast

Gwent Badger Group (1979). BRIEFLY ON BADGERS. Publisher: Gwent Badger Group, Abergavenny. ISBN 0 90506774 18.

Royal Society for Nature Conservation. FOCUS ON BADGERS. Publisher: RSNC, Lincoln.

For further information contact:

EHS Education Officer,
Commonwealth House,
35 Castle Street,
Belfast BT1 1GU
(028) 9054 6533

Web: www.ehsni.gov.uk/education/factsheets.shtml

Wildlife

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BADGERS

The European badger *Meles meles* is a member of a family of musk bearing carnivores called MUSTELIDAE which also includes otters, pine martins, polecats and stoats. The badger is the largest member of this family to occur in Ireland.

Badgers occur throughout the British Isles, except on some Scottish islands and on high ground over 500 m. They are to be found in all European countries, apart from the northern most parts of Scandinavia and Russia, and in all temperate parts of Asia as far east as Japan.

DESCRIPTION

The badger has a stout, rounded, bear-like body with short powerful legs and a comparatively small head. The length of the head and body is normally 60-90 cm, with a 15 cm tail. On average, an adult male (called a boar) weighs about 12 kg, and a female (a sow) weighs about 11 kg, although weight varies through the year depending upon availability of food.

From a distance, the body of a badger appears to be a grizzled grey colour, because the hairs of its coat are white with a black tip. The underparts and legs are black and the tail is light grey with a white tip.

The badger's white head with its two broad black stripes is its most distinctive feature. The eyes are small, black and inconspicuous, being hidden in the black stripes. The ears are small and black with white tips.

Badgers are well-adapted for digging. Their legs are short, but very powerful, and the feet bear five strong claws each. The claws on the fore feet are particularly long and sharp, and the joints of the toes are protected by shock absorbing cushions of tough, fibrous tissue.

A badger's sense of smell and hearing is very acute. Eyesight is poor and, because rods dominate in the retina, is best in poor light. Young cubs are very short sighted.

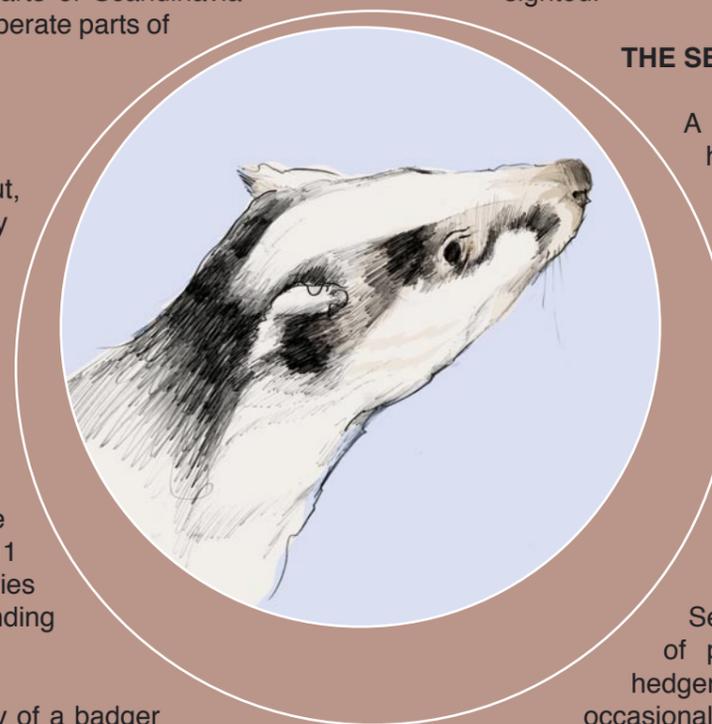
THE SETT

A badger's underground home or set is a labyrinth of tunnels and chambers. A sett typically has 3-10 large entrances at least 25 cm in diameter, although most are much larger. The large spoil heap of excavated earth outside the sett often contains plant debris which the badgers have used as bedding and then discarded.

Setts are dug in a wide variety of places including woodland, hedgerows and open fields, and occasionally in embankments, Iron Age forts or under buildings.

Ideally, badgers will select sites where

- there is adequate cover;
- the soil is well drained and easy to dig;
- there is little disturbance by man or his animals; and
- there is a varied and plentiful food supply nearby.



BREEDING

Normally, only one female from a group will breed each year. Mating can take place at any time, but is most frequent between February and May. Although the embryo only takes eight or nine weeks to develop, the majority of cubs are born in February. Female badgers are able to store the fertilised eggs in their bodies until December, when the embryos settle down and begin to grow in the womb. This process is called delayed implantation.

For the first few weeks after birth, the cubs spend much of their time buried in a nest of warm, dry vegetation inside the sett. Cubs emerge above ground for the first time when they are about eight weeks old.

A litter of two or three is usual, but can range from one to five. The mother will suckle them for at least three months.

The cubs develop rapidly and at five months they are nearly as big as their mother. They normally remain in the parental sett for at least a year, but on reaching maturity, (1-2 years) the males usually move off.

Mortality of cubs can be high, with between 50% and 65% dying in their first year. Adult mortality is 30-35% per year. In Northern Ireland, the major cause of death is road traffic.

Few badgers live beyond six years in the wild, although some have reached 11 years. In captivity, badgers can live up to 19 years.

TERRITORIES

Badgers live in social groups, each of which has its own distinct territory. An average social group contains approximately six individuals, but numbers can rise to about 12 when cubs are born. Several adult boars and sows may live together in the same group sharing a single main sett, or they may spread out into other setts within the territory. There is usually a dominant boar in each group.

In places where the badger population is very high, the territory of a social group may be as small as 40 hectares but usually it is much bigger. Badgers, especially boars, will mark the edge of a territory by clawing trees or placing dung at strategic points on the boundary. The dung is impregnated with a musk-scented brown fluid produced by glands near the badger's tail.

Every night, badgers will follow established routes around their territory. These well-defined, scent-marked tracks lead to and from sett entrances and link the more important parts of the social group's territory, such as favourite feeding places, a source of

water, dung pit areas and secondary setts.

Where a badger track passes under a low strand of barbed wire, hairs from the back are often caught on the barbs. The long guard hairs are straight and wiry, and mostly white with a dark patch near the tip. Sometimes a tuft of the short, woolly, pale-coloured under fur may also be caught on the barbs.

BEHAVIOUR

Badgers are mainly nocturnal, emerging from the sett around dusk. Emergence and activity is reduced in winter but there is no true hibernation.

Badgers are occasionally active during the day, especially in secluded areas when food is scarce. Digging and bedding collection may be carried out during any month of the year but particularly in autumn and spring. Large amounts of bedding are used to line chambers in the sett: 20-30 bundles of dry grass, bracken, straw, leaves or moss may be brought in on a single night. A badger will carry bedding gripped between its chin and forepaws, and then shuffle backwards with it down into the sett. Periodically, old bedding is discarded. On fine, sunny, winter days, bedding may be aired for a few hours outside the sett.

Badgers love to play, and it is an important social activity. The cubs often indulge in vigorous play after they emerge in the evening. Chasing and mock fights are accompanied by a continuous, excited whickering. Adults frequently join in and may also play among themselves.

Grooming is another social activity. After emerging from the sett, badgers groom themselves thoroughly, often contorting themselves to get at every part of their body with claws or teeth. Mutual grooming also occurs and may have a social function by helping to strengthen and bond between members of the same group.

FOOD

Badgers are primarily opportunistic foragers, not hunters. They are omnivorous, feeding on a wide range of animal and plant foods.

Earthworms are the most important item in the diet, but badgers will also eat insects, small mammal carrion, cereals, fruit and roots. Other foods which are taken when available include frogs, slugs, fungi and grass.

Badgers will dig small pits with their muzzles when searching for worms and grubs in the soil. They will also break open cow pats to search for insects and other invertebrates.

Badgers are very fond of wasp grubs. They will break open any wasps nest they find using their powerful claws, and will then make a meal of the grubs and adult wasps. The badger's thick fur prevents stings by stopping the angry wasps from reaching its skin. Forestry workers often appreciate badgers which dispose of wasps which have become too numerous.

BADGERS AND MAN

Hundreds of badgers are killed on the roads each year, and in some parts of the country it is the major cause of death. Many are killed between February and April at a time when cubs are being suckled. If the mother is killed, then all the cubs will die too. The death toll rises again in September/October as the young animals move away from their home setts in search of new territories.

Road deaths can sometimes be reduced by placing tunnels under new roads at points where badgers cross. A badger-proof fence must also be erected on either side of the entrance to guide badgers into the tunnel.

Badgers may cause damage to garden lawns, bowling greens and golf courses by digging for worms and grubs. Some gardeners welcome badgers and can excuse the small amount of damage done. However, the only ways to prevent unwelcome visits are to remove the food source with non-persistent pesticides, or to fence out the badgers.

Occasionally, badgers open up holes in fields or under farm lanes. This can be a hazard, especially when heavy machinery is being used, as the roofs of tunnels may collapse. Badger excavations can also weaken road, railway and river embankments. These problems can be dealt with under the guidance of Environment and Heritage Service of the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland.

One problem which unfortunately faces badgers is digging, often with the aid of dogs, to obtain badger skins or live animals for baiting. This cruel "sport" involves badgers being set against dogs. During the fight, dogs are often so badly wounded that they have to be put down. The badger always loses, but may take hours to die. Digging and baiting are illegal and offences can carry a fine of £5,000 per badger and up to 3 months imprisonment.

