

Badger

As our climate changes, gardens are becoming even more vital to wildlife and people. They can provide shade, absorb carbon, soak up flood water and help to cool buildings. A well managed network of gardens stretching across the Sussex would also help wildlife to move more freely and adapt to climate change enabling us to create a living landscape

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Scientific Name *Meles meles*



badger / Darin Smith, info@wildstock.co.uk

Common Name Eurasian badger

The badger belongs to the mammal family known as the mustelidae (possessing musk glands), otherwise known as the weasel family, which also includes the otter, stoat, polecat, ferret and pine marten.

The name badger is believed to come from the French word 'becheur', meaning digger.

Male badgers are called boars, females are sows and the young are cubs.

Life Span Up to 14 years

Statistics

Head and body length: 65 – 80cm.

Weight: 8 – 12kg.

The badger is the largest land carnivore left in the British Isles following the extinction of the bear and the wolf. Males are slightly larger and heavier than the female.

Physical Description

Badgers are easily recognised by their striking black and white striped facial markings. They have white tipped ears, silvery grey backs and small, white-tipped tails. Badgers have small heads, small eyes, thick short necks and long wedge-shaped bodies. They have short, powerful legs and five well-developed claws on each foot, which make them exceptional diggers.

A few badgers may be albino (white), melanistic (black) or erythristic (ginger). Colour variations depend on the amount of melanin, a natural substance that gives pigment to hair and skin, in the badgers' hairs and is controlled genetically.

It is possible that the black and white stripes warn other animals that the badger can look after itself and will defend its territory.

Distribution

Badgers range across Europe to Japan and S. China. Throughout Europe badger numbers are in decline. The British Isles are one of the species' strongholds.

Badgers are fairly common and widely distributed throughout Britain and Ireland, but are scarcer in Scotland, Lancashire and East Anglia. The south west of England, in particular, has a very dense population.

Habitat

Badgers prefer a mix of deciduous woodland, open pasture and fields but also like large gardens and railway embankments.

Diet

Earthworms, frogs, rodents (hedgehogs, rats and mice), birds, eggs, lizards, insects, bulbs, seeds, fruit and berries.



badger drinking in garden /
www.natureconservationimaging.com
Jeremy Early



badgers / Paul Stevens

Badgers are members of the order carnivora, but they are actually omnivores and eat a wide range of plants and animals. They have a varied diet depending on the food available and the time of year. The

badger is a forager rather than a hunter and so is an opportunist when it comes to diet.

Foraging for earthworms is most effective on areas of short grass. As a result badgers are keen to visit regularly mown lawns. If you are interested in attracting wildlife to your garden and want to feed badgers, it is safe to give them dog food, fruit, root vegetables, peanuts and raisins. But only provide very small amounts of food so that the badgers do not become dependant on you.

Badgers rely on an extremely good sense of smell. They have large, rubbery noses to forage for food, as well as to gather information on their surroundings. Badgers also have a good sense of hearing, but their eyesight is poor and they might only be able to make out shapes rather than fine detail.

Behaviour

Badgers inhabit underground burrows called setts. These usually consist of a network of several chambers, interconnected tunnels and entrances and are used by successive generations of badgers.



badger / Darin Smith, info@wildstock.co.uk

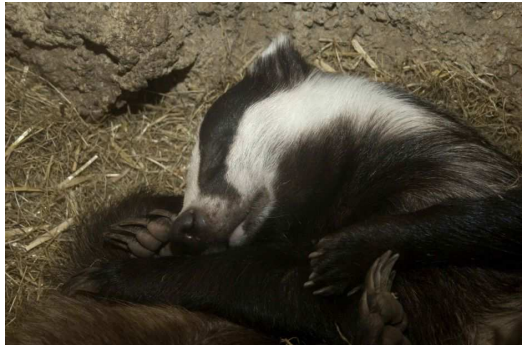
Setts are usually found on sloping ground where there is some cover, for example in woods and copses, especially if attached to pastureland. They are typically excavated in soil that is well drained and easy to dig, such as sand or chalk.

Several categories of sett have been identified. Every badger group has one main sett which is occupied continuously and is used for breeding purposes. They are usually large, well established setts which have been excavated by several generations of badger and are therefore vital for the badgers' survival. Main setts have a number of entrances, used and disused, with large spoil heaps. Main setts are always active with well trodden paths.

In addition to the main sett, most groups also have one or more additional setts within their territories. These secondary setts usually fall into three categories:

1. Annexe setts - many well used entrances, well worn paths linked to the main setts and not always in use
2. Subsidiary setts – with a variable number of entrances, not directly connected to other setts and not always in use
3. Outlier setts - with one or two entrances, no defined paths and only sporadically used.

Female badgers collect dry grass and bracken as bedding to line the nest and keep their cubs warm. Nesting material is often carried out of the sett in the day and aired in the sunshine. Entrances to a sett may have large heaps of excavated earth and bedding close by.



sleeping badger / Darin Smith, info@wildstock.co.uk

Eurasian badgers are shy, nocturnal creatures that warily emerge from their setts at dusk to feed and groom themselves. They live in family groups, or clans, of up to 15 individuals, which occupy a shared territory of 125-375 acres. Each group is headed by a dominant male and female. Male badgers patrol their territory boundary regularly during the main breeding season (February – March) and mark the borders of the territory with odour or dung which is deposited in latrines or boundary dung pits. If a stray boar from another colony is encountered the ensuing fight can be particularly fierce. In their family groups, they will indulge in playful romping, which helps to strengthen their social bonds.

Badgers are creatures of habit and will tend to occupy the same sett for long periods of time. They also tend to use the same runs or pathways when they leave their setts and forage for food. This can result in badger road casualties as they will quite often cross the same stretch of road every night in order to look for food.

Contrary to popular belief, badgers do not hibernate, although they have developed strategies for conserving their energy and body weight during the winter months when their normal diet of earthworms and grubs are not available.

Life Cycle

Usually only one female in a group will reproduce successfully. Generally, one to five cubs are born in January or February. They are blind for about five weeks, pink with white silky fur and measure about 12cm long.

After being suckled underground for around eight weeks, the cubs start to emerge from the sett at the end of April / beginning of May. This gives them enough time to feed and develop sufficient fat reserves to carry them through their first winter. Cubs are not totally independent from their mothers until they are about 15 weeks old.



badger / Darin Smith, info@wildstock.co.uk

Reproduction in badgers is unusual and involves a phenomenon called 'delayed implantation'. Badgers mate at any time of year but embryos do not implant into the womb and start growing until the winter. The fertilised eggs remain in the uterus in a state of suspended development until they are implanted in the uterine wall, usually after 10 months. As a result all cubs are born at the same time of year. The gestation period is 7-8 weeks. The system of delayed implantation maximises the badger's chances of being successfully mated and also ensures that cubs are born at the best time of year for survival.

Predators and threats

Badgers only enemies are other badgers and humans. They are sometimes culled because they are thought to spread the disease bovine tuberculosis to cattle.

They can feel the vibration of oncoming cars on the road, but like hedgehogs, their reaction is to stand still. As a consequence, up to 50,000 are killed on roads every year.

Conservation Status

Badgers are not considered endangered but numbers have been depleted. They have an extremely high level of protection under various wildlife acts, including the Protection of Badgers Act, 1992. It is an offence to intentionally kill, injure or capture a badger, or to interfere with its sett – except by applying for a license. Inhumane means of control are illegal.

The last estimate of the British population was around 250,000. As badger numbers are in decline throughout Europe, the British Isles are one of the species' strongholds.

Relevant Organisations

The Mammal Society *<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/mammal>*

Mammals Trust UK *<http://www.mtuk.org>*

Badger Trust *<http://www.badger.org.uk>*

Sources

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- ◆ Badger Trust - *<http://www.badger.org.uk/>* (1.01.07)
- ◆ ARKive - *http://www.arkive.org/species/ARK/mammals/Meles_meles/more_info.html* (31.01.07)

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