

Species Factsheet: Badger (*Meles Meles*)



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Quick Facts

Recognition: Black and white striped long face. Body is grey with paler fur underneath, with black fur on legs. Low-set animal, short tail.

Size: Head & body 56-89cm, tail 11-20cm

Weight: 8-20kg

Life Span: The maximum life expectancy is about 14 years, though very few survive so long in the wild.



Distribution & Habitat

Badgers are widespread in Britain, being most common in the south west, rarer to the north and east; thinly distributed in Scotland. They are common throughout most of Ireland, but absent from the Isle of Mann, and most of the other islands.

General Ecology

Behaviour

Badgers are mostly nocturnal and rarely seen during the day. When not active, badgers usually lie up in an extensive system of underground tunnels and nesting chambers, known as a sett. Each social group usually has a main sett where the majority of the group live most of the time, but there may be odd holes scattered around the territory that are used occasionally. Badgers can live in social groups of two to 23 adults, but usually around six. They defend an area around their main sett as a territory. Territories may be as small as 30ha, but can reach up to 150ha or more. Badgers mark their territory by leaving their faeces in collections of shallow pits, which in aggregate are called latrines.

Diet and Feeding

Badgers exploit a wide variety of food items, but earthworms form the majority of the diet.

Reproduction

Mating typically takes place between February and May, with implantation delayed until late winter. Litters of 2-3 cubs are born around February blind and hairless in the safety of the nest. They usually appear above ground at about 8 weeks, and weaning usually takes about 12 weeks. By late summer they are usually feeding independently but can be adversely affected by drought at this time causing starvation.

Conservation Status

The Protection of Badgers Act 1992 consolidates past badger legislation and, in addition to protecting the badger itself from being killed, persecuted or trapped, makes it an offence to damage, destroy or obstruct badger setts. Where badgers pose a problem, licences can be issued to permit certain activities. Badger baiting (using dogs to fight badgers) has been outlawed since 1835. The Badgers Act 1973 afforded limited protection against badger digging, and was finally outlawed in 1981. About 80 local groups have been formed by enthusiasts wishing to protect and study badgers. Their activities include protecting badgers from diggers and baiters by reinforcing setts, helping with care and rehabilitation of injured badgers, having tunnels and badger proof fencing added to new road schemes and giving developers advice about setts.

In 1988 there were estimated to be around 42,000 social groups of badgers, and just under 200,000 adult badgers. By 1997 this had risen to just over 50,000 social groups and 310,000 adult badgers. The population is now probably stable. Mortality is high, with around one-fifth of adults dying each year. Road traffic accidents are a major cause of death. Some badgers are infected with bovine tuberculosis, particularly in the south west of England. These animals are the subject of a control campaign by Defra. There is a continuing debate about the role of badgers and cattle infecting each other with TB.