

Badgers in Gardens

Badgers are one of Britain's most well-known wild animals, and are both common and widespread in Cornwall. Although rarely seen, they frequently come into the edge of urban areas to forage and are increasingly forced to live in close proximity to humans as we expand into the countryside. Badgers are a spectacular sight in gardens but sometimes their habit of digging up lawns can make them unpopular. A little knowledge of the natural history of these social creatures can help you understand some of the reasons they visit your garden and can also be used to discourage unwanted activity without harming badgers or other wildlife.

Badgers...did you know?

- Found in a range of habitats including woods and copses, scrub, hedgerows, quarries, moorland, open fields and even housing estates!
- Omnivorous, opportunistic feeders; earthworms are favoured but diet varies throughout the year and may also include insects, fruits and berries, cereals, birds, small mammals, reptiles and amphibians.
- Largely nocturnal animals, being most active at dawn and dusk.
- Usually live in social groups of approximately five to twelve individuals within a particular territory, which varies in size depending on food availability.
- Occupy underground setts which consist of several chambers, passages and entrances. These are used by successive generations and can be more than 100 years old!
- Large, powerful animals with adults up to a metre long and usually weighing between 6 and 14kg.
- Close relatives of otters and stoats (Mustelids) and use their musky scented droppings to communicate.



Photo: Terry Dunstan

Why do badgers cause damage?

Your garden may form part of a badger's territory and almost invariably they will enter in search of food. The most obvious signs of badgers feeding are usually scrapes or snuffle holes in lawns which appear as pits where badgers have used their highly developed sense of smell to locate and unearth worms and insect larvae. Badgers will also eat flower bulbs, fruits and vegetables, will take food put out for other animals, and occasionally raid dustbins. In very dry or frosty weather it is harder for badgers to get at their preferred earthworm and insect larvae foods, so your lawn, crops or flowerbed may seem particularly tempting!



Badger sett in woodland. Photo: Alex Howie

Badgers and the Law

Badgers and their setts are legally protected under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992. This information sheet gives some general guidelines for deterring badgers and you should seek suitable advice on how to deal with badger related problems before taking any action; drastic or ill-advised measures could make things worse and may also be illegal.

Badgers are powerful animals that can break or dig under most conventional fencing and any damage is likely to recur if repaired as badgers will continue to use traditional pathways. Badgers may also mark their territory boundaries by digging a latrine consisting of one or more small pits, some of which will contain dung. Occasionally they will dig temporary 'day beds' or even excavate an outlier sett close to a seasonal feeding area such as orchards with windfall apples. Entrances to badger setts are clearly larger than rabbit holes, at least 25cm across, and have a characteristic 'D' shape.

Discouraging badgers....

If badgers are causing damage in your garden and you feel some form of action is necessary there are various methods which can help minimise conflict without harm to badgers or other wildlife. It is often very difficult to deter or exclude badgers from your garden as they are creatures of habit and can be quite stubborn!

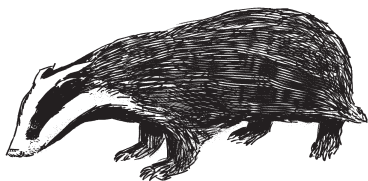


Illustration: Sarah McCartney

Remove what attracts them

The most humane and long-term solution is to remove or prevent access to what attracts badgers:

- Keep to bird food mixes fed from rodent-resistant feeders to reduce the amount spilt.
- Avoid using bird tables and putting food directly on the ground, and clear away windfall fruit.
- Use expanding straps to securely seal dustbins
- Do not dispose of strong smelling or cooked food scraps on open compost heaps.
- Avoid using fertilisers containing animal remains such as fish, blood or bonemeal.



Photo: Terry Dunstan

Alter grassland management

Improved aeration and drainage of a lawn will reduce the amount of insect larvae prey. You can use a garden fork to make air channels then brush a sandy top dressing across the surface so that it fills the holes, allowing air and water into the lawn. This is best carried out annually in the autumn.

Leaving the grass longer through spring and autumn could also help make any damage less visible, and worms may be more difficult to find, making your lawn less attractive to badgers. These areas may also encourage wildflowers and attract insects, birds and other wildlife.

Protect vulnerable areas

Possibly the only practical way to exclude badgers at times of seasonal damage is to protect vulnerable areas such as vegetable patches or fruit plots using temporary electric fencing. Either rabbit-proof electric netting or a two/four-strand polywire fence may be used, available from most agricultural stores. Detailed information is available from Natural England's Wildlife Management and Licensing Service (see contact details below). Please be aware that obstructing access to a sett is illegal, so ensure you confine fencing to your vegetable patch or flower border.

Install a badger gate

To prevent repeated damage to fencing it is easiest to accept that badgers will try and use an established path; either leave a gap or provide a two-way badger gate. Further information on how to make and install a badger gate is also available from Natural England.



Badger gate image courtesy of www.badgerland.co.uk

Grin and bear it?

Since damage is largely seasonal, occurring for limited periods of the year, many gardeners find it easier to tolerate the nuisance. In fact, badgers may even help to remove some garden pests such as cockchafer and leatherjacket, and you may find that watching badgers foraging in your garden can be enjoyable and educational, particularly for younger members of the family.

Need more advice?

If none of these options have worked for you, you can get more information and advice from the Natural England Wildlife Management and Licensing Service, **Natural England**, Burghill Road, Westbury-on-Trym, Bristol BS10 6NJ, tel: 0845 601 4523 or email: wildlife@naturalengland.org.uk.

Further information and advice

Wildlife Information Service (WIS)
Environmental Records Centre for Cornwall
and the Isles of Scilly (ERCCIS)
Five Acres, Allet, Truro, Cornwall TR4 9DJ

Tel: (01872) 302 250
Email: wis@cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk
Web: www.erccis.org.uk

Other useful contacts

- The Badger Trust:
www.badger.org.uk
- Cornwall Badger Rescue:
www.cornwall-badger-rescue.co.uk,
tel: (01736) 797740 or 07831 121949
- West Cornwall Badger Group:
www.cornwallbadgergroup.org.uk
- RSPCA: www.rspca.org.uk,
tel: (0300) 1234 555 (advice line)

Get involved

Share your sightings with us
Online Recording for Kernow and Scilly
(ORKS) www.erccis.org.uk/ORKS

Become a member of the Cornwall Wildlife
Trust www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk