

HOW TO WATCH BADGERS

SEEING FOR THE first time a badger in its natural surroundings emerging cautiously from its sett, is one of those almost magical experiences that remain with you for the rest of your life. But, as always, with privilege comes responsibility.

The lives of the badgers must not suffer from our intrusion into their world, and so we have the responsibility to make sure that our pleasure is as unobtrusive as possible. Always remember that badgers and their setts are protected by law, and both interference with the animals themselves, and disturbing their setts, is illegal.

Badgers are nocturnal and live in underground burrows called setts, with large entrance holes, sometimes one, but usually more. Depending on the age of the sett there may be 10-20+ entrances, connected underground and covering a large area, but not all will be used at the same time. Foxes and rabbits also occupy badger setts at times.

Before you go to watch a sett, it is better to check sometime during the day to see which holes are being used, and to decide the places which give the best views over the maximum number of entrances. It may be possible to clear away a few dead leaves and twigs from the selected places, and so make your arrival in the evening less of a disturbance.

Some of the signs of badger are:

- Large spoil heaps at the entrances from the badgers' underground digging.
- Black and white firm hairs, with the distinctive badger hair shaving-brush appearance.
- Bedding material around (bluebell leaves, bracken, grass, etc.) left outside the entrance to air.
- Scratched trees.
- Dung pits near the sett, saucer-shaped, dung left uncovered.
- Well-worn paths leading away from the sett, and between the various entrances.
- Badger footprints.
- Lack of food remains (feathers, bones, etc.) which a fox would leave.

- No fox dung—this is generally cat-like with thin, cotton-sized endings.
- No rabbit droppings—lots of little round pellets.
- If a sett is in use it is sometimes possible to see flies at the entrance. They are attracted by the smell and warmth of the badger, but repelled by the darkness, so they fly to and fro, in and out, not knowing what to do.

Not all these signs may be present at one time. Sometimes signs of badger, fox and rabbit may all be present, so individual entrances have to be examined thoroughly and with great care. When fox and rabbit are present in a sett they rarely use the same part of it as the badger.

Setts can be in banks or in fields, on arable land or pasture, on reclaimed marshland (e.g. Romney Marsh), in the banks of ditches, in railway cuttings or embankments, under buildings, or mostly in woodland, perhaps under tree roots. In fact badgers can be found anywhere they choose to colonise: it is never safe to say badgers cannot be in any particular place.

For the purpose of this leaflet we will choose a common site, woodland, which may have bluebells in the spring. If you find a sett in such a wood, at some time in the day check where the most used entrances are. There could well be many unused old entrances, perhaps covered in moss and with leaves and twigs in them, but some will be freshly excavated and have recently-dug earth outside; others will have smooth earth, appearing shiny and well-established, with paths to other entrances. If it is bluebell time, it will be easier to see the paths in and out and around in the wood, and possibly areas of beaten-down bluebells where the cubs have played. It is better to watch in Summer, when badgers are more likely to come out at a regular time, cubs may stay and play, and the adults will stay if peanuts (unsalted) are thrown around the entrances. But do not do this earlier in the day - the birds may eat them when you have gone!

There are conventional 'rules' for badger watching, but do not worry *too* much about them.

- Wear dark clothes which do not rustle or crackle.
- Do not wear strong (or any) 'perfumes'.

- Use a red filter on your torch.
- Keep downwind from the sett.
- Arrive half-an-hour before sunset.

Dark clothes may or may not be necessary, depending on the particular badgers. It may be useful to wear a balaclava, but only to keep the insects away. You must choose between being cool in thinner clothes and getting bitten to bits, or hot in non-penetrable clothes. The insects will be a nuisance and will attack you the moment the badgers emerge, just when you need to keep still and not swat them. Wear warm boots/shoes: on the warmest night, feet can get cold standing in one place.

Keeping downwind from the sett may not matter, and anyway the wind could change. If there is too much wind the badgers may stay at home in any case. And if you are wearing insect repellent, the badgers may well be able to smell you wherever you are.

In Summer, arriving half-an-hour before sunset will probably result in you seeing nothing, or at best the rear end of a badger disappearing down a path. Arriving about an hour before sunset will give you a better chance, and also time to prepare. Make sure you are comfortable. Depending on the landscape, you could bring a stool and sit, or perhaps a stick to lean on. Stand in front of a tree or whatever you have chosen, as badgers seem not to see you clearly if your silhouette is broken up a bit. Get your camera ready and your tripod set up. Be prepared, though, for the badgers to disappear underground the moment the camera clicks as you take a photo, so you could well end your watching at that point; but usually they will re-emerge after a short wait. If near the end of a film, be prepared for the badgers not to like the noise of a camera motor winding off the film, and winding on a new one. Video cameras are better. Not only are they quiet, but many will enable you to see far more of what is happening in the dark than you could with your eyes. Also get your binoculars in focus on one entrance, as it is not easy to do so after the light goes; but when it does go, it will seem lighter using them, than peering with the naked eye.

Say all you need to say to your companions. Maybe make up some sort of discreet signalling agreement to indicate

if one sees a badger nose appearing, and want to tell the others. Even a whisper of, "Look, over there!" can ruin the night for everyone. If you need to move your arms to gently prod your friends, or lift binoculars to your eyes, move very slowly, to avoid attracting the badgers - they do not have particularly good eyesight but can easily detect movement around them. Also, remember to turn your mobile phone off - someone is bound to ring you at just the wrong moment. Get your sweets and handkerchief in the right pockets, move your feet around to make sure you are on earth and not crackly leaves. Calm down and get your bearings, because it will probably be dark when you leave. Remember where you have put your torch.

Having prepared as much as you can, watch each entrance in turn. You may hear the wood-pigeons coming home to roost, possibly collared doves too. Robins will call, warning everything you are there. Rustling may be small animals scuttling around; do not worry about them. You may see foxes and rabbits, and possibly hear a tawny owl at close range, which may make you jump - this is, after all, their territory you are invading. Keep quiet, and wait. And be patient.

Before badgers emerge you may hear them eating any peanuts which have rolled down the sett entrance, so this may be a warning for you to flex your legs and stretch discreetly before having to stand like a statue. You may see badgers and have a rewarding evening; you may see nothing - it is all in the luck of the draw. If you see nothing, do not despair. Try another night. Badgers are nothing if not their own bosses and will make up their own minds if they want you to see them, because, despite your preparations, they almost certainly do know you are there!

You could use the torch before you go - no need for filters. After all, badgers are used to the moon, so if they are around you in the dark, just before you leave (in case they do not like it) switch on your torch shining at the sky, and gradually bring it down to their level. You may be rewarded with the sight of them totally unconcerned. After enjoying this for a while, the next time something sends them scuttling off, pick up all your equipment and

quietly leave them in peace to go about their own business, grateful to have been privileged to share a small part of their lives for a while.

Do not take too many people with you - four might be fine, but five could mean no-one sees anything. Do not watch too often with different people, because although they may become used to you, it is not fair for the badgers to have to be continually on the lookout for humans, even if they are kind ones.

Common sense and patience go a long way - good luck!

Lastly, and not wishing to state the obvious, you should always get the landowner's permission if you are going to visit private property.

To contact the West Kent Badger Group:

Email: westkentbadgergroup@yahoo.co.uk

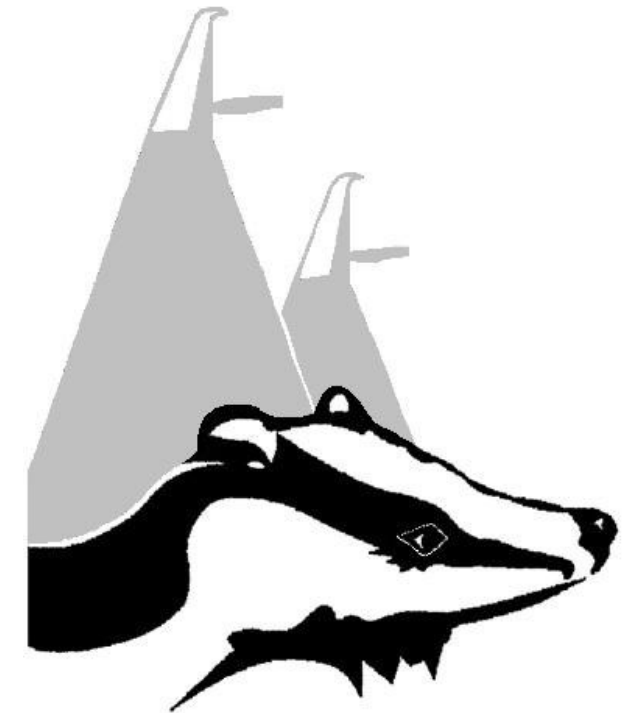
Website: www.wkbg.org.uk

For the East Kent Badger Group please
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The West Kent Badger Group produces leaflets on the following topics:

1. General Information about Badgers;
2. WKBG: Protecting the Badger;
3. *How to Watch Badgers*;
4. The Badger's Enemies;
5. Badgers in your Garden;
6. Badgers and Developments

How to Watch Badgers



A free information leaflet from the
West Kent Badger Group