

Badger problems: advice to householders

Great Britain supports some of the highest densities of badgers (*Meles meles*) in Europe. Badger numbers have increased, especially in urban areas, and they can sometimes cause problems. These can range from damage to gardens, property and amenity areas to problems with serious implications for human safety such as the undermining of roads and railways. In urban situations, where a number of adjoining properties may be affected, solving a badger problem may require discussion and co-operation between neighbours.

Badgers and the legislation

Badgers and their setts are protected under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992, which makes it illegal to kill, injure or take badgers or to interfere with a badger sett. Interference with a sett includes blocking tunnels or damaging the sett in any way. There is, however, provision within the legislation to allow action to be taken under a licence from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) (for address see under "Licensing and Further Information") for the purpose of preventing serious damage to property. In some cases, it may be possible to advise on finding solutions without resort to licensed action.



Damage

Damage to lawns

Badgers are an adaptable species and are good at exploiting the range of foods available in urban areas. Not least among these is the food specifically put out for them by householders. However, they also eat invertebrates and may dig shallow pits in lawns when foraging. This is often what brings badgers into conflict with householders. Earthworms are mostly taken from the surface of the ground but, during dry conditions, damage to the turf can occur. The presence of insect larvae such as those of cockchafer and crane-fly (leatherjackets) can damage a lawn and may also attract badgers. Rooting by badgers to feed on these larvae can make an existing problem worse. This kind of damage is usually short-lived and likely to be most pronounced in late Autumn and early Spring. Additional problems can be experienced when badger latrines (dung pits), which are used to mark the boundaries of territories, are sited in gardens.

Damage to fruits and vegetables

Badgers are particularly partial to strawberries and raspberries and may damage soft fruit crops. They



have been known to break the lower branches of fruit trees whilst feeding on apples, pears and plums, and they also eat vegetables such as potatoes, carrots and sweetcorn. Even flower bulbs may be dug up and eaten.

Raiding of dustbins

Badgers will often over-turn dustbins in their search for food, especially during hot, dry summers when other sources of food may be limited.

Damage to structures

Badger setts can be large, with extensive tunnel systems. When excavated beneath structures such as buildings, roads or fences, there may be a risk of subsidence. There is also potential for damage to electrical cabling and other services. Advice should be sought from Defra at an early stage if badger activity appears to be causing damage to a structure. In cases where serious damage is being or is likely to be caused, action that affects the sett may be allowed under a licence from Defra. Interference with a sett without such a licence is illegal.

Prevention of damage

Some problems caused by badgers can be solved relatively easily. For instance, bins which are regularly overturned can be fitted with a clip-on lid or expanding "bungie" straps which secure the lid. When latrines are a problem in gardens, one solution is to dig the pit up. A spade should be used to remove the dung which can then be buried or placed in a location where it is less likely to cause problems.

Reducing damage to lawns and crops can be very difficult. The costs of preventing the damage can sometimes outweigh the benefits; in fact, some gardeners tolerate it as it can be largely seasonal, occurring for limited periods of the year. There are steps which can be taken to alleviate the damage, including the installation of fencing.

Fencing

Fencing is a more effective remedy than chemical deterrents but it can be expensive. Either strong metal (chain link or welded mesh) or electric fencing can be used to prevent badgers gaining access to an area.

Permanent fencing

Heavy duty chain-link fencing is used because of its strength; chicken wire is usually inadequate. As badgers are capable of climbing, it is usually necessary to incorporate a supported 30cm (12") overhang at the top of a fence, directed away from the area to be protected. The fence should be at least 125cm (48") high and be buried to a depth of 60cm (24").

Alternatively, the mesh can be lapped outwards for 50cm (20") on the ground surface to prevent badgers digging underneath it.

Electric fencing

A simpler and cheaper alternative is electric fencing. This can be operated either by a car battery (which must be recharged regularly) or through a 12v transformer powered by mains electricity. A mains-powered fence can be connected to a timer which ensures that the fence only operates when it is needed. Either rabbit-proof electric netting or a two-stranded polywire fence can be employed, although steel wire may be a better option where the fence is needed to last several years. The strands of wire fences should be erected at a height of 8cm (3") and 20cm (8¾") above the ground. It is important that both types of fence are firmly staked to the ground and stretched taut. In addition, the fence should be well earthed and, to prevent shorting out, vegetation should be cleared from around the wires. Advice on the most appropriate type of fence can be obtained from agricultural suppliers.

Repellents

There are currently no repellents specifically approved for use against badgers under the Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986. Renardine, a bone oil formulation that previously could be used, is no longer approved.

Alternative remedies

As already mentioned, damage to lawns is sometimes caused by badgers attracted by the presence of invertebrate turf pests. Removal of these pests using a pesticide approved for the purpose may alleviate the problem; however, the effects on other beneficial invertebrates (and those species which may feed on them) should be considered. An alternative solution may be to lay wire netting beneath the soil to prevent badgers digging for grubs or flower bulbs.

In some instances, damage to gardens has been successfully reduced through the provision of alternative sources of food. This could, however, make the badgers dependent on humans and it is also possible that it could attract more badgers to the garden, increasing the potential for damage in neighbouring properties as well. Early recognition of problems, and agreement between neighbours can be beneficial in finding a satisfactory solution.

Badger damage to garden fences can be minimised by incorporating two-way gates into the fence. An advisory leaflet describing the specifications of such gates (WM11) is available from Defra (see under 'Further Information').

Further information and licensing

Where serious damage is, or is likely to be, caused by badgers or their setts, there is provision within the legislation for action to be taken under licence. It should be noted that garden damage due to foraging alone is not normally considered sufficiently serious to warrant the issue of a licence. Where a licence is issued to prevent serious damage to property, such as damage caused by sett building, the cost of carrying out any remedial action is borne by the licensee.

In England, further advice on dealing with badger problems and licensing can be obtained by contacting the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) Wildlife Management Team at:

Address: Wildlife Administration Unit, Defra, Burghill Road, Westbury-on-Trym, Bristol, BS10 6NJ

Telephone: 0845 601 4523 (local rate)

E-mail: enquiries.southwest@defra.gsi.gov.uk

A range of leaflets on wildlife topics is available online at: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/vertebrates>