

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 legislation

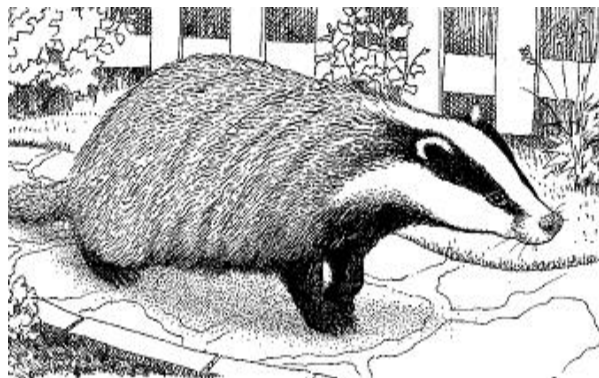
Badgers and their setts are protected under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992, which makes it illegal to kill, injure or take badgers or to interfere with a badger sett. Interference with a sett includes blocking tunnels or damaging the sett in any way. There is, however, a provision within the legislation that allows action to be taken – under a licence from Natural England – to prevent serious damage to property (see 'Further information and licensing'). In some cases it may be possible for Natural England to suggest solutions that do not need 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 the food put out specifically for them by some householders. However, badgers also eat invertebrates and may dig shallow pits in lawns when foraging for them. This is often what brings badgers into conflict with householders. Earthworms are mostly taken from the surface of the ground but, during dry conditions when earthworms stay underground, damage to the turf can occur. The presence of turf-dwelling insect larvae such as those of cockchafer and crane-fly may also attract rooting badgers. 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 may damage soft fruit crops and are particularly partial to strawberries and raspberries. 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.

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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 Natural England 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, actions that affect the sett may be allowed under a licence from Natural England. 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. With regards to badger latrines, one solution is to dig up the pit then bury or place the dung somewhere 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 30 cm (12 in) overhang

at the top of a fence, directed away from the area to be protected. The fence should be at least 125 cm (48 in) high and be buried to a depth of 60 cm (24 in). Alternatively, the mesh can be lapped outwards for 50 cm (20 in) 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. In either case an Electric Fence Energiser conforming with appropriate British Standards is required. A mains-powered fence can be connected to a timer that ensures that the fence only operates when it is needed. Either rabbit-proof electric netting or a polywire fence can be employed, although steel wire may be a better option where the fence is needed to last several years. For strained wire or polywire fences a two-stranded or four-stranded specification may be used. For two-stranded fences the wires should be erected at a height of 8 cm (3 in) and 20 cm (8¾ in) above the ground. For four-stranded fences, the strands should be set at 10, 15, 20 and 30 cm (4, 6, 8 and 12 inches) above ground level. 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 invertebrates (and those species which feed on them) should be considered. An

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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 (TIN025) is available from Natural England (see below).

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.

Further information

In England, further advice on dealing with badger problems and licensing can be obtained by contacting the Wildlife Licensing Unit, First Floor, Temple Quay House, 2 The Square, Bristol, BS1 6EB.

Tel: 0845 601 4523 (local rate)

Fax: 0845 601 3438

Online: wildlife@naturalengland.org.uk

A range of leaflets on wildlife topics is available online at:

www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/regulation/wildlife/default.aspx