

Badgers



These unmistakable animals are widespread in Britain and common in many parts of Essex. They have a distinctive black and white striped face, grey back and black fur on the underparts and legs. The head and body measure up to three-quarters of a metre (2½ feet), not counting their short, blunt tail. They are heavily built mammals, with short powerful legs ending in strong claws. At the beginning of winter, when they are at their heaviest, they may weigh well over 10 kg (22lb).

Badgers dig their homes, known as setts, in woods, usually near open fields. These consist of an extensive system of underground chambers linked by tunnels and have several entrances. They are usually found in light soil as it is easier for the badgers to dig. To make their underground homes comfortable, they collect bracken, grass and dry leaves to line the chambers and are fastidious animals, changing their bedding on dry nights. In order to keep their home hygienic, they dig small pits close to the entrance to use as latrines.

Badgers live in social groups of between four and twelve adults; the male badgers are called boars and the females, sows. Within the social group there is a dominant male and only one female badger normally breeds, although, occasionally, more may do so.

One litter a year, of one to five offspring, is produced in late winter to spring, commonly February. Badger cubs are born blind and helpless, and stay with their parents for about a year. They may live for up to 15 years in the wild and longer in captivity, although badgers in the wild survive, on average, only three years.

Badgers are rarely seen during the day, but just after sunset they leave their setts to hunt for earthworms, slugs, snails, mice, frogs and insects, as well as to forage for fruit and seeds and to dig up nests of wasps and bumblebees, always returning to the sett along the same well defined pathways. They spend even longer periods of time underground in the colder months of the year when food is scarce and difficult to find, surviving the winter on body fat built up in the autumn.

Although badgers have no natural enemies, mortality is high, often as a result of road traffic accidents especially in the winter mating season as males wander far and wide looking for mates. Once persecuted as a so-called sport, and more recently because of the possibility of their transferring TB to cattle, badgers are now protected by law and may not be deliberately killed, persecuted or trapped.