

How to Find a Badger - 7 Top Tips

Photo: Kirsty Wilson



Badger

IT'S NOT ALWAYS EASY

Mammal watching in Britain is a tricky pastime. Of the sixty or so species we have in the U.K., the majority of them remain well hidden. Most of them are small, and many of them are nocturnal, only venturing out from their daytime retreats long after we're tucked up in bed. The ones which do come out in the daytime are usually well camouflaged. By the time you've spotted them, they've usually seen or heard you first, and vanish before you get a good look at them.

If you want to see a badger, not only do you have to look for them in the dark, but you're up against the badgers highly sophisticated human avoidance mechanisms!

Badgers have superb hearing. If you're lucky enough to see one out in the open you'll need to keep perfectly still. Never mind stepping on a brittle twig or some crunchy dry leaves, badgers can hear your clothes rustling from twenty metres away, and if they do, they'll dive straight back down their underground home.

They've also got a superb sense of smell. It's thought to be around 800 times better than our own. These guys can sniff out an earthworm while it's wriggling under

ground, so detecting the strong aroma of 'freshly washed human' anywhere in their vicinity is a doddle for them.

All the guide books tell you if you want to see badgers in the wild you need to get yourself in a comfortable viewing position before sunset, downwind of the badgers home, and wait silently. But how do you know where to wait? You don't want to miss a good night's sleep for nothing. You want to know that even though you're sitting silently, freezing to death and being bitten to bits by mosquitoes, there's a very good chance you're going to be rewarded with at least a brief sighting of a badger. That's where your tracking skills come in.

Looking for signs of badger activity can be almost as much fun as seeing the animals themselves. It's a bit like detective work. You're looking for clues as to where the badgers have been, and where they might be living. It's good to familiarise yourself with these clues as they tell you quite a bit about the lives of these elusive animals.



Badger Scrapes

1. SCRAPES

Badgers are omnivorous. The bulk of their diet is made up of earthworms, and to find them

they have to dig small holes in the ground known as 'scrapes'. They are usually about 10cm deep and roughly 10cm in diameter.

In the middle of summer when the ground is dry, digging for earthworms can be hard work. This is when they are sometimes attracted to well watered garden lawns, where the ground is much softer and easier to dig. Obviously this lawn vandalism doesn't earn them any points with gardeners, but in dry summers, when food is scarce, it can be a lifesaver for the badger.



Badger Dung Pit

2. DUNG PITS

Being civilised animals, badgers never leave their dropping in or around the entrance to their homes. Instead they dig a shallow hole in the ground known as a 'latrine' or a 'dung pit'. Depending on their diet the droppings can be soft and runny or dry and sausage shaped.

There can be several of these dung pits near to the badgers home. When one becomes full they simply dig another one next to it. Sometimes they get a bit lazy and you get what I call 'kitchen bin syndrome'. You know when the kitchen bin is full to overflowing, but you still try to balance one more bit of rubbish on the top rather than take it out to the dustbin. Badgers do that with their dung pits.



Badger Sett Entrance

4. THE SETT

The badgers home, or 'sett' consists of one or more chambers, linked by a network of underground tunnels. Entrance holes are about 30cm in diameter and there's usually more than one.

Outside the entrance there will be a large mound of soil, built up from soil excavated by the badgers. Depending on the time of year, you may also notice piles of dry vegetation. This might consist of grasses, dry leaves or bracken, and would have been used in the sett as bedding material. Badgers change their bedding regularly to prevent the build up of parasites inside the sett.

You can check if the sett is occupied by placing a couple of twigs over the sett entrance and returning the next day to see if they've been moved.



Badger Pathway in a Bluebell Wood

5. PATHS

In springtime, the sett entrance, the mound of soil and the old bedding material may be hidden under all the new growing vegeta-

tion. In this case look for well worn paths leading from the sett entrance. Because the badger is a relatively heavy animal, the vegetation around the sett becomes well trampled leaving a 30cm wide path which leads directly to the sett entrance. This can sometimes reveal a large part of the route taken by the badgers.

People often follow these paths through woods, and it's quite possible that some of the footpaths which criss-cross our countryside today could have been created by foraging badgers.



Badger Pawprints

3. PAWPRINTS

If you're lucky enough to find them, pawprints, or 'tracks' are a great indicator of the presence of badgers. Unfortunately you need just the right sort of conditions. Mud, snow or sand are great for recording where a badger has been walking, but if the ground is hard, the badger can just pass through without leaving a mark.

The pawprint of the badger is about 35mm wide by 45mm high. The palm pad leaves a wide impression and you'll usually see the dents left by the sharp claws at the front. The prints of a badger could possibly be confused with those of a dog, but with dogs you see only four claw marks and with a badger you see all five claw marks. Also the hind print frequently partially overlaps the fore print.



Badger Scratching Post

6. SCRATCHING POSTS

Close to a sett, you'll usually see a tree which a badger has scraped its claws down. Sometimes you'll notice a few chips and scrapes in the bark where the claws have caught. On well used scratching posts there will be big gouges in the wood. The marks only go up the tree to a height of about 1 metre, which is as high as the badger can reach from the ground. It's not known for certain why badgers like to scrape their claws against trees, but badgers have scent glands in between their toes, so they could be using the tree as a territorial marker.

Badgers live in social groups, but they will drive away badgers from other groups.



Badger's Shortcut Under a Fence

7. SHORTCUTS

Badgers are creatures of habit, and when something like a fence is put in the way of their foraging route, they find a way under it or through it rather than having to make a detour around it. Look for gaps about 25cm. in diameter. You might also see a few coarse grey or white coloured hairs snagged on the wire.