

SPECIES OF THE WEEK



European Badger

Meles meles

Broc

The European badger is the largest of the four mustelids native to Ireland, the others being the otter, pine martin and Irish stoat. They are widespread throughout Ireland, but, being secretive and principally nocturnal, they are seldom encountered in the wild. Some badgers now live in suburbs alongside urban foxes, but there is rarely any conflict between the two species.

They are powerfully built mammals that have a short, fat body and short, sturdy legs well suited for digging. They have small eyes and small ears and a long head. Their skull is heavy and elongated, and they have an oval braincase. Their fur is grayish and they have black faces with white stripes on their top and sides of their face and neck. Badgers have a third eyelid that protects their eyes from all the flying soil, and thick guard hairs in their nostrils and ears to keep them clear of debris when digging their tunnels.

Although most mustelids are carnivores, badgers are omnivores. They feed on a wide variety of plants and animals depending on seasonal availability. These include invertebrates such as earthworms, insects, snails and slugs, with earthworms forming the largest proportion of their diet. They also eat small mammals such as rats, voles, shrews, moles, mice and rabbits, and small reptiles and amphibians such as frogs, newts and lizards. They also eat fruit, cereals and grass, and will eat carrion if available. A badger group's territory will include a variety of habitats to allow for foraging at different times of year when some prey items,

such as earthworms, are scarce or hard to obtain. They gorge themselves on available food, especially in autumn, gaining as much weight as possible before winter. Studies in several Irish counties have shown that territory size can vary from as little as 15ha to almost 300ha, with a mean of about 80ha.

European badgers are social animals that live in colonies of 6 to 20 individuals. they are adept diggers and almost always excavate their own setts, though they will also make use of disused structures, caves, and crevices in rocky outcrops. The Badger and Habitat Survey of Ireland (1995) found 35% of badger setts in hedgerow, 19% in scrub and 18% in woodland habitats. Several setts will be present within a badger group's territory, but the focus of the badger group is known as the 'main' sett. The main sett is situated roughly central within the group territory and is usually occupied throughout the year and used as the principal breeding sett. An active main sett is characterised by considerable signs of activity, such as copious bedding, nearby latrine (defecation) sites, and well-used paths. A main sett might occasionally just have one or two entrances, but more typically, it will have numerous entrances and chambers. Large soil heaps outside the sett entrances are indicative of a large underground tunnel and chamber system. Other setts within a group's territory are usually smaller and only used intermittently or seasonally. A very large main sett can possess 300m of tunnel and 20 or more chambers. Setts are often utilised by generations of badgers and may be enlarged each year, and collapses can occur too. The size of the sett is not indicative of the number of badgers present. Badgers are nocturnal and spend much of the day in their setts.

Whilst badger mating can occur at any time of year, most take place between February and May. Male aggression and territorial behaviour increases from February onwards. Delayed implantation of fertilised embryos until late winter results in a true period of gestation of two months, with all cubs being born over a period from mid-January to mid-March, peaking in February. Litter sizes vary from one to five but are usually two to three. The cubs will suckle for up to three months, and remain below ground for about eight weeks, emerging in late April or May, and they do not become independent until about four months old, but may remain with their mother over the winter period. Males reach sexual maturity by their second year, females often by their first year. The mortality of cubs is high in the first year; badgers in the wild rarely exceed six years in age (maximum life expectancy up to 14 years).