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Badger / Broc

Mammal Factsheet

The **badger** (*Meles meles*) is common and widely distributed throughout Ireland. This distinctive mammal belongs to the *mustelid* family which also includes otters, stoats and pine martens. Badgers are found most commonly in wooded farmland, open pasture and fields as well as large gardens and along railway embankments.

The badger's black and white-striped head really tells it apart from all other Irish mammals. They are stout animals with a coarse grey coat of fur and a small, white-tipped tail. Badgers have a head-body length of around 65-80 cm and a bodyweight of 8-12 kg. The males (boars) are larger than females (sows). Their short, powerful legs have five well-developed claws on each foot, which makes them exceptional diggers. They can easily excavate extensive networks of tunnels and chambers, called *setts*, which they use for shelter and breeding. **Badgers and their setts are protected by law throughout Ireland and Great Britain.**

Badgers are very social animals and live in groups of between three and six. They are shy, nocturnal creatures that cautiously emerge from their setts at dusk to feed and groom themselves. Their extremely well developed sense of smell is used to recognise one another, find food, navigate their territory and detect signs of danger.

Although badgers eat worms, frogs, birds' eggs, and small mammals and even carrion, they also forage for roots and berries. Because their diet is so varied, badgers do not need to travel great distances when out on their nocturnal feeding forays, and it is rare for them to go more than a few kilometres from their home.

Female badgers collect dried grass and bracken as bedding to line the nest and keep their cubs warm. There are often several entrances to a badger sett, which may have large heaps of excavated earth close by. Used bedding may also be found at the sett entrance. Their organised and clean lifestyle extends to using clearly defined latrines where they deposit their droppings.

From late October to late December, badgers sleep for an increasing amount of the time, but even then in mild weather they wake up and go out in search of food. They become very active from February onwards, and their young are born in spring. Usually only one female in a group will reproduce successfully. Generally, up to five cubs are born in January or February and are blind for about five weeks. They emerge above ground in April or May. By late summer the cubs are able to fend for themselves, but it is common for them to remain with the mother through their first winter.

Badgers can live up to 14 years and have no enemies except other badgers and man. They have long been the victims of terrible acts of cruelty such as bating with dogs. Wire snares cause intense suffering to badgers and other wildlife as well as pets, especially cats. Snares have now been banned in Northern Ireland.

Badgers are helpless in the path of oncoming traffic and although they can feel the vibration of oncoming cars on the road, like the hedgehog, their reaction is to stand still. As a consequence many are killed on our roads each year.

Badgers are often blamed for infecting cattle with Bovine Tuberculosis (bTB). However there is no scientific evidence that badgers are responsible for TB outbreaks in cattle. Neither is there any evidence to indicate that badger culling will do anything to reduce the incidence of TB outbreaks in cattle. There is increasing evidence that badgers catch TB from cattle, which are the main reservoir of the disease.