

Badgers in Gardens and Green Spaces

Occasionally badgers can cause problems in gardens and green spaces such as playing fields, golf courses etc. These problems are often seasonal and short lived. Rushing into extensive, and often expensive, works is not recommended. Many problems resolve themselves fairly swiftly. The information below is intended to help you to decide what type of problem you are having and to give some information on how it might be resolved.

It is important to try to categorise the type of problem that is occurring:

- They are passing through the area damaging fences
- They are leaving dung in small, uncovered holes
- They are digging for food
- They are digging for shelter

Fence Damage

Walk round the perimeter to see where they are getting in. Badgers are very powerful creatures and can both dig under and climb over fences unless they are of a certain standard. Blocking holes under the fence can potentially trap a badger in an area, which can cause distress to the badger and further damage. Unless you are willing to spend a substantial sum of money and go to considerable lengths, it might be best to accept that your garden is on a badger route.

Dung Pits and Latrines

Badger dung is found in two very different situations. Firstly single “dung pits” are found around the territory and are essentially places where badgers have evacuated their bowels, although they also serve as a signal to others of the clan. In some places you may find a considerable number of these dung pits together. This is a “latrine” and is used to mark a territorial boundary between different badger clans. The siting of the latrine provides a signal to a neighbouring clan of badgers that this territory is protected. The latrine may be at the edge of a physical feature such as a track, fence or boundary of trees and there is sometimes another (oppositional latrine) created by the neighbouring clan on the other side of the boundary.

It may be possible to move a single dung pit and prevent recurrence by digging it up and spraying the area with citronella. It is extremely unlikely that this will work with a latrine, as additional marking is done through scent glands. Apart from the considerable effort involved some of these latrine sites have been in use for generations and trying to change an ingrained habit is almost certain to fail.

Digging for Food

Badgers eat a wide variety of food but rooting for earthworms and grubs (the larvae of crane flies and beetles) is often the cause of damage to lawns and other short grassland. The reasons for this damage vary according to the time of year and weather. In dry seasons worms will burrow deeper into the ground and be harder to find. A freshly watered area of grass will enable worms to remain near the surface and on warm, windless nights they will come onto the surface to mate. This is the ideal situation for a badger who will work across a shortly cut lawn sucking worms up like spaghetti! Reducing watering during dry periods and allowing the grass to grow a little longer than usual (5cm or more) can reduce these problems. When this type of feeding is occurring small badger snout shaped depressions in the lawn, known as snuffle holes, will be the main sign. A number of insects but particularly crane flies and chafer beetles lay their eggs on lawns and when the larvae hatch they

feed on the roots of the grass. Crane fly larvae (leatherjackets) tend to be dark coloured and straight whereas chafer larvae are white and “C” shaped with a black head. In lower densities infestation by these species is not usually noticed by the gardener, but as numbers increase there is a serious deterioration in both the quality and structure of the grass. Yellow patches may form, and magpies, rooks and crows will leave bill marks in the lawn as they search for larvae. The presence of these larvae also causes badgers to dig and the reduced structure of the sward makes the damage caused by their digging even worse than it might otherwise be.

Badgers usually dig for larvae in late autumn or early spring. Where this is happening, the situation can be eased by improving the quality of the lawn. Use non-bone-meal fertiliser, rake out moss and repair damaged sections. Improved aeration and drainage will also help. Make air channels with a garden fork or commercial aerator, and then brush a sandy top dressing over the surface so that it fills the holes and allows air and water into the lawn. This is something that will need to be done annually in the autumn. Laying 2mm HDPE twine netting with a 48mm mesh (standard chain link fencing) and then seeding the area with grass can prevent serious digging but this is only really possible during initial planting.

It is also worth thinking about using eco-friendly non-poisonous ways to reduce the insect load in the lawn. Biological control products using tiny nematode worms that predate the larvae can be ordered online or sometimes from your local garden centre. There are different species of nematode depending on the particular target that you are seeking to control, and it is very important to get the right one. All these nematode applications need to be applied when the temperature is 12C or more. They need to be well watered in and the ground should be kept damp for a couple of weeks after the application. All these products come with clear instructions which should be carefully followed.

Badgers will eat bulbs and some other root stock and can create problems when digging in borders or pots to reach these. They will also eat fruit, both ground-grown and fallen from trees as well as dropped food from bird feeders. In some areas they may overturn dustbins to get at the contents. Digging in pots and borders can sometimes be prevented by placing a suitable size of weldmesh just below the surface and pinning it down securely. This will enable plants to grow through the gaps but make digging by badgers more difficult. Fallen fruit and dropped food from bird feeders, especially peanuts, should be cleared as soon as possible and not be left lying overnight. Dustbins of the shorter type should be securely closed especially if there is smelly food in them. Strapping or elastic bungee cords are useful for this and sometimes it may be good to secure the bin to something to prevent it being rolled around in an attempt to open it. Wheelie bins are generally taller and therefore harder to get into, but again, securing to something solid to prevent them being overturned might be sensible. Protecting ground-grown fruit can be a real problem and if the problem is severe an electric fence may need to be considered. Serious thought will need to be given to the risks to domestic pets and children as well as the costs and difficulties of installing and operating an effective system.

It is important to remember that in some areas housing has been built on traditional badger feeding grounds. This means that badgers will already have routes through the area and preferred places to feed. The fact that your garden is now in the way will not concern them greatly.

Digging for Shelter

Where badgers are digging for the shelter the situation is potentially more serious. A badger sett is protected by law and is defined as “any structure or place displaying signs indicating current use by a badger”. This can be a typical sett in woodland with many entrances and huge spoil heaps outside or a single burrow under a garden shed or decking. The area can be defined as a sett even if there is no

digging and a badger has simply managed to squeeze through a gap to access the area underneath decking. Badger clans are hierarchal. Sometimes young badgers (especially males) fall out with the dominant boar and are attacked by him. They will often leave the sett for a short time and seek shelter elsewhere within the territory. They may use a space under a shed or other out building or inside a barn or garage. Sometimes it is the dominant boar who has become sick and old and is unable to maintain his position as head of the clan any longer. When he is displaced by a younger male he will head off looking for a place to hide. If you think that this is happening, then you need to seek competent advice quickly.

Get in touch with Scottish Badgers by email speciesprotection@scottishbadgers.org.uk or telephone 07866 844 232 between 09:00 and 17:00 on Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday. At any other time email info@scottishbadgers.org.uk or telephone 07792 142 446. You will be asked to take photographs if possible and send them to us, so we can make an initial assessment of the situation. Please refer to the document entitled "Photographing suspected badger setts for Scottish Badgers" which provides more information on how to do this.

Standard Fencing

Installing badger-proof fencing requires expertise, considerable effort and substantial funding and it could only be considered in the most desperate situations. Standard badger-proof fencing requires to be of suitable strength and mesh size, must be dug in to a suitable depth around the whole area to be protected and will need an appropriate return. The work and cost involved will prove prohibitive for most situations.

Electric Fencing

Electric fencing can provide a short-term answer in some circumstances. Although it is cheaper than a standard badger-proof fence it requires great care in choice, location and management. As has been mentioned above there may be risks to children and pets which need to be carefully considered.

Chemical Deterrents

There are no chemical deterrents available that are both legal and likely to be effective.

Electronic Deterrents

Some companies sell ultrasonic alarms which claim to deter visits from a number of species, including badgers. There is currently no evidence that these devices are useful in deterring badgers in the long term.