

Foxes and badgers

Foxes and badgers are intriguing to watch but can also cause considerable damage

Q Where are foxes and badgers found?

A Foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) are extremely common in both urban and rural areas throughout the country. Badgers (*Meles meles*) are widespread, but are most common in the south-west, rare in East Anglia and sparse in Scotland.

Foxes are highly territorial, with territories ranging from 0.2 to 40 sq km depending on the availability of food. Territories may be occupied by a solitary adult fox, or a small family group made up of a breeding pair, their 3-6 cubs and related adults. Badgers live in social groups of 4-12 adults based around a main sett, often with subsidiary setts used at different times, with feeding areas which may be some distance away and used seasonally. Usually only one female in the group breeds, producing two or three cubs.

Q What do they eat?

A Foxes and badgers are omnivorous, eating a wide range of animal and vegetable foods. Foxes eat small mammals, especially voles and rabbits, worms, beetles and fruit. They will also take small birds and carrion.

The badger's most important food is the earthworm, but they also eat bulbs (though not bluebells) and small mammals including young rabbits. In upland areas they eat carrion. Fruit, especially blackberries and windfall apples, are important foods in autumn.

Q Why are they attracted to gardens?

A Both foxes and badgers roam far and wide in search of food and will return to areas where it is plentiful. Badgers are not likely to live in gardens. Foxes often take up residence if there are suitable daytime hiding places such as under sheds or overgrown corners.

Q How do I know if they visit my garden?

A Most people are familiar with the appearance of the russet-brown fox. A young vixen is the size of a cat, an adult dog fox up to 35cm at the shoulder, 60-70cm long with a long bushy tail. Foxes are most often seen at night. Tell-tale signs include their nocturnal cries and distinctive rank, oily smell. Adult badgers are about 75cm long, with a short tail, a black-and-white-striped face and grey body. However, you are more likely to see signs of their presence than the badgers

themselves as they are very shy and almost entirely nocturnal. Look along the boundaries for well-worn trails, or for long, black-and-white hairs caught on fences.

Q What damage do they do in the garden?

A Both animals dig holes to catch earthworms and grubs and both are partial to fruit. Badgers will also dig for tap roots and tubers including carrots and potatoes, and are fond of sweetcorn. If their sett is nearby, they may strip foliage for bedding. Foxes will dig up bulbs and scavenge around bird tables. They also hide or 'cache' food by burying it for future use. One *Gardening Which?* reader found a dead seagull buried in a tub of asparagus, and several have reported undamaged hen's eggs hidden in containers with no sign of disturbance. Foxes make themselves even more unpopular by rummaging in dustbins, leaving strong-smelling scent marks and fouling the area with faeces.

Q How can I deter these animals?

A If foxes or badgers have only recently started using your garden, try to make it less

attractive to them. Block entrance holes to the garden; remove temptations such as food put out for pets or other wildlife; and avoid animal-product fertilisers such as bonemeal.

Q What if they are regular visitors?

A It's worth experimenting with repellents as they can be effective. The theory is that they will deter other animals from what they perceive to be an established fox's territory or just make the area smell unappealing. For best results treat the areas where the animals enter the garden, and any places where foxes lie during the day. Repeat if necessary after ten days.

Q What about fencing?

A Foxes can climb and jump like cats, so normal fencing is not much of an obstacle to them. However, they can be kept out with roofed structures such as fruit cages. To prevent them scrabbling under the netting, add about 30cm of chicken wire at the base, with half bent outwards and pegged down flat, or buried under a few centimetres of soil. Badgers are strong diggers so will simply tunnel under most forms of fence. However, electric fencing has proved effective round vegetable plots. You need to use two strands of wire placed 7.5cm and 20cm above the ground. The fence must be kept entirely free of vegetation, which would earth it, and be checked regularly. Electric fencing is available from agricultural suppliers, listed in Yellow Pages. For more advice on installation and use, contact the RSPCA.

Q Do visiting foxes and badgers cause any health risks?

A Foxes may suffer from mange, which makes their hair fall out. In theory this could be passed on to dogs but in practice it does not seem to happen. If there are many foxes in your area, The Fox Project can give advice. Fox faeces may contain parasites, so wear gloves when clearing them up; bury them deeply or wrap them up and bin them. Fox tapeworms have caused concern on the continent, but do not occur in British foxes. A few badgers carry bovine tuberculosis, but there has never been a recorded case of them passing it on to humans.

Q Will foxes attack my pets?

A Foxes will attack small pets such as rabbits and guinea pigs, as well as poultry or other birds. Keep them out with secure pens and runs. Foxes tend to avoid dogs, and cats seem well able to look after themselves. Kittens could be at risk, however, so keep them in at night.

Q Do foxes and badgers have any legal protection?

A Landowners are allowed to kill foxes, but this is neither advisable nor necessary in a garden context. Badgers are protected by The Protection of Badgers Act 1992 and other legislation, making it illegal to harm them or their setts except under very specific circumstances when a licence may be issued.

Q How can I find out more about foxes and badgers?

A Your local county Wildlife Trust can usually give advice and information, or you could contact one of the organisations listed below.

Useful organisations

The Fox Project
The Southborough Centre,
Draper Street, Southborough,
Tunbridge Wells, Kent,
TN4 0PG
01892 545468
www.foxproject.org.uk

Badger Trust
2B Inworth Street
London SW11 3EP
020 7228 6444
www.badgertrust.org.uk

The Mammal Society
2B Inworth Street
London SW11 3EP
020 7350 2200
www.abdn.ac.uk/mammal

RSPCA
Wilberforce Way, Southwater,
Horsham, West Sussex
RH13 9RS
0870 33 35 999
www.rspca.org.uk

RSPCA emergency number for
wildlife casualties
0870 55 55 999

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