

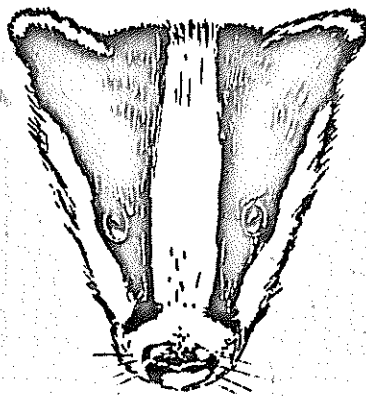
*P. G. Caudwell*

SURVEYS OF LEICESTERSHIRE NATURAL HISTORY  
SUPPLEMENT TO No. 2

# BADGER NOTES

OBSERVATIONS AT A CHARNWOOD SET

by T. J. WHALL



LOUGHBOROUGH NATURALISTS' CLUB

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### EDITORIAL PREFACE TO SUPPLEMENT

The aim of the editors, in presenting this series of surveys, is to place in the hands of members all available information on the particular subject under consideration. For this reason, it is considered justifiable to issue this supplement at the same time as "The Badger in Charnwood Forest". Mr. Squires has made reference in the appendix of his book to Mr. Whall's many new discoveries and novel techniques and we are indebted to Mr. Whall for writing up his "Badger Notes" at such short notice.

It is impossible at any one time to produce a complete coverage of any subject, since we are always learning something new, and the facts we do know are subject to change. This is certainly the case with the badger; observations at one set may seem to contradict what a person sees at another set and yet this only emphasises how little we really know about the biology and psychology of badgers. Only by recording and comparing our observations can real progress be made.

The purpose of this supplement is to encourage members to participate in natural history field work and to observe for themselves some of the delights of nature. Badger watching is one of the most rewarding pursuits and one where much original work can be carried out.

The Loughborough Naturalists' Club will be very pleased to receive notes on badger behaviour from observers and will pass on original information to the Mammal Society unless requested otherwise.

J. Crocker  
P. H. Gamble  
M. Walpole

## BADGER NOTES FOR BEGINNERS

### Observations at a Charnwood Set

Almost the only view point I entirely agree with in such Badger lore I have read is the fact that once having started Badger watching, one is landed with it for life.

I cannot say how many times I have seen badgers, of all sizes and shades, emerge from the ground or arrive at my watching post, and always the thrill is the same. Perhaps it is the contrast between the utter desertedness of the set during the day, with the sudden coming to life of the landscape when these black and white peppermint striped heads emerge, so immaculate in evening dress, often so silently that the incident has a dream-like quality. Then there is always the fun of trying to guess which animal will emerge first - will it be Fred or Sally or Ginger. Sometimes one is so intent on watching an emergence from one hole that two or three more animals will materialize from the same set before their presence is noticed - so silently can they move. Even on dry bracken, I have become aware of a badgers arrival with less noise than the antics of the mice which always live in the sets I watch, which plainly know their way through the tunnels at least as well as the badgers, and with much more seeing eyes.

Many would-be badger watchers are put off by the accounts of naturalists spending fruitless nights just getting colder and colder, and never an animal in sight. During the past year I have been to the badger grounds hundreds of times, in all weathers, and have never failed to see at least one badger, with no more than a few minutes wait. Only one evening provided an exception. For weeks prior to the night the clocks

were changed in October this year the badgers had arrived within minutes either side of seven o'clock. With the changing of the clocks, I therefore went up just before six by the new time. For an hour I waited, until, as the distant clock struck seven Fred came ambling into view! Just chance, I suppose, but a very odd chance after such persistent regularity. Two nights later I went up at 5.45 p.m. and the badgers were there before me, as if to try to make up for their lapse on the Sunday night.

Once having found a badger set which shows active use, your enjoyment can begin immediately. To begin with, you must avoid letting the animals get the unaccustomed scent of you, so hang a bus ticket on a yard of cotton from an overhanging tree as near the set as possible to show the wind direction. Sit as close to the set as you like, but so that your scent is carried clear of the holes.

If you start in early summer, about six in the evening should be a good hour for the emergence of young cubs. I have had them out in July at 4.30 p.m. by dropping something smelly like a bit of chopped up bacon rind at an entrance to the set.

A set will probably have half a dozen holes currently in use, and several half blocked holes from previous years. It will be easy to see by the smooth worn state of the ground outside the hole, which the badgers prefer to use. If you start in the late summer or autumn, when the old bedding is being turned out to air the set for winter occupation, do not expect to see badgers from the newly turned out holes. In my experience, they do not use a hole for several weeks after they have cleaned it out. Having chosen a well worn hole, sit yourself quietly on top of it so that your scent does not go

below and throw a small handful of dry puppy meal just within the hole. Within ten minutes, you should be startled by a vigorous crunching and crackling as a hungry animal, wakened by your arrival starts its unexpected breakfast. Whilst his head is full of the noise of his own mastication, move quietly a yard or two further away and throw a little more food down outside the hole, and you will soon see, and feel the thrill of your first controlled emergence. There is no need to use expensive puppy meal except for locating an underground animal. For general distribution round the entrance any kitchen scraps will do, but the smellier and the meatier the better. The smell will both draw the badger, and mask any human scent that may be wafting about. Whatever food is put down, make sure it is chopped up small so that it can only be eaten on the spot. Badgers love half a round of toast, or a meat bone, but they will promptly dive below ground with anything that is bigger than can easily be swallowed in one go. I do not know whether this is through nervousness, or whether they generously wish to share the prize with the family below.

If in the spring, say on a May evening, you surprise the cubs playing outside the set around seven o'clock, you may be sure they will dive below ground, but a bit of food thrown down will soon fetch them out again. Indeed, one needs to give cubs quite a big scare to keep them down for more than a few minutes. If you have sets sufficiently accessible to visit them nightly for a week or two, you should be able to start hand-feeding the cubs within ten days of your first visit. The way to do this is to sit about three yards from the active hole (I use a folding aluminium armchair) and lay a trail of food from the hole to your feet - for the first

weeks sittings. Wind rarely persists in one direction, and eddies will bring a little of your scent to the notice of the cubs and give them a somewhat anxious expression at times, but their hunger will always overcome their fear and soon you will find they will take food from a large spoon held in the hand. You will soon get to know the kind of activity which badgers do not like and then you will be ready for sitting on the holes themselves, to feed the older animals by spoon.

I find that badgers of any age do not mind being talked to in a normal voice and, though badger watching may cost you your favourite television programme, there is no need to miss your radio, as no notice is taken of a portable set placed on the ground beside you. A few Sundays ago my badgers listened most patiently to the Sunday night service, until the preacher coughed into the microphone, which made them jump. Badgers do not like the squeak of my chair or the rustle of my water-proofs, but although these sounds sometimes cause a dive for earth, they immediately turn round in the hole, whilst still in sight, and re-emerge.

Much has been written about the amount of vision possessed by these mainly nocturnal animals, and badger specialists have written of the need for avoiding offering any human silhouette to the badgers and the use only of shrouded hand lamps after dark. My own experience is that the most powerful hand lamp obtainable can be used within 12 inches of their nose without any apparent awareness. I have frequently fed badgers from a bowl held in one hand illuminated by a six inch lens hand lamp held with the other. My own view is that the badgers vision is limited to a few inches from its nose. Perhaps not more than three. I have noticed that a badger will pick up small pieces of food with just a tiny opening of the mouth but if

offered a wide bone will only open its mouth wide enough at the last moment when the bone comes into view.

A great deal of interest can be derived by trying out various foods. Savouries seem favourite, but badgers love ice cream and sweets, jam, cake and honey, and will stay for about half an hour licking a stone that has been coated with treacle. They will eat any amount of dry bread, but for quickest emergence, bread or puppy meal - all broken down small and soaked with old soup or gravy - is irresistible. Pigeons eggs are eaten with relish, the breaking of the shell is preceded by a curious tossing of the badger's head, almost as if the egg were made of pepper.

Curious anomalies arise - last winter, even when food was scarce the badgers would not touch cabbage leaves - though they are said to eat mainly vegetation - and apples put down were eaten, but only after it became certain that nothing else was going. Two rabbits were put down, one shot the day before the other. The fresher one was eaten, but the older one lay there until it rotted away. Yet they eagerly ate two sterile pigeons eggs that the birds had sat on for three weeks. Although mice are said to be part of a badger's diet, I have never been able to get them to eat trapped mice and on one occasion watched a mouse eating the badger's food only a foot away from brock himself. Squirrel carcasses have been ignored.

I always keep a bowl of water by the set, as our human food scraps invariably contain more salt than is usual, and give rise to a healthy thirst. One night I replaced the water with cows milk, and the badger jumped back a foot at the unexpected flavour - he immediately resumed drinking with great gusto and almost finished the pint before being joined by his



relatives. On one occasion tree bark, laid over a bowl of milk to keep the leaves out, fell into the milk and was completely consumed after the milk was gone.

Badgers do not seem too intelligent in some respects. I have often had a badger feeding vigorously and others have emerged presumably just as hungry, but being out of line of food scent have not joined the eating badger, although they have eaten greedily when food has been thrown to them. Of course, if my theory about their lack of vision is correct, this would account for them not seeing that one of their number was eating, but it surprises me that the sound of eating did not suggest a walk in that direction.

Although cubs can be seen and photographed in bright sunlight in summer, the adults rarely appear until the sun is at least below the tree-tops. Frequently, the cubs, after a spell of an hour or more of playing will amble back into the holes, to re-emerge with a rush after half an hours rest, with parents tumbling out behind them.

If the light is right, it is often possible to anticipate the emergence of a badger by the horde of gnats driven out before him as he shambles up the tunnel. In deep winter, the presence of badgers is quickly betrayed by the shimmering steam emerging from the highest hole in the set.

The size and depth of a set can be found to some extent by tying a meaty bone to a length of string. The badger will immediately take the bone into the set, and if a lot of noise is created with the feet, will probably go with it as far as he can. I have lost over 12 feet of string in this way, and as that particular hole plunges down after a short horizontal run of about 3 feet at an angle of  $45^{\circ}$  the bottom

of the hole must be well in the earth.

After a while it will be found possible to sit right on top of a hole with the animals feeding within touching distance - I do not touch them - only the other day I threw a small pebble onto the back of a badger, and he promptly bit the badger next to him!

To study the living animal after dark from a foot or so, with a powerful torch, is quite fascinating, and I have been surprised at the sparseness and fineness of the back hairs - which look so thick when viewed from a distance.

Badger tails are sometimes pointed and sometimes spatulate. Mr. Ernest Neal tells me that this is a sex indication, the females having spatulate tails. I have one young badger (called Ginger) with sandy colouring and a broad tail, so I am watching it closely this year for signs of pregnancy.

About August the breeding set is cleaned out and abandoned for residential purposes and the badgers move into more or less isolated holes a couple of hundred yards away. Every night, however, the old set is re-visited and inspected, and at about three week intervals, further turning out of old bedding is undertaken. In the Autumn I still wait by the old set for my friends to come, and on dry nights in October and November - as soon as the air begins to have a nip, the task of bringing in fresh bedding is begun.

I am often puzzled by the fact that bracken is brought - by the animal walking backwards and dragging the bracken with its forepaws - quite some distance - 30 yards perhaps - when apparently equally good bedding lies within a few yards of the set. The explanation of this would seem to be that in the course of dragging, the bedding becomes more or less

interwoven - birds nest wise - and is really a primitive form of a knitted blanket by the time it reaches the bottom of the tunnel.

Then winter comes, but contrary to widely held opinion, the badger does not really hibernate, and the arrival of snow soon shows the badgers nightly excursion in search of food and his foot-marks go far and wide. It really is too much to face the leafless wood, even for badger watching on many winter nights, but I have fixed a food box near ground level outside my kitchen door, and frequently around eight o'clock the banging of the box upon its bracket announces an arrival, and if the kitchen light is left on the familiar black and white muzzle will be seen through the glass door. One night last winter I braved the cold and waited without a sight of badger. Then, trudging peevishly back towards the house, I came face to face with a badger just trotting from the kitchen door towards me. Somebody's watch was wrong that night!

Do not watch badgers unless your heart is sound. Quite apart from the excitement of the animal's arrival, you will from time to time be treated to the sudden and unexplained performance of the badger's scream. I have only heard it three times, but it is a truly blood curdling experience. On one occasion this summer I was sitting watching six cubs playing in daylight. One trotted off into the bracken on my right. He could not have gone twenty yards when the air was suddenly split with screams. I thought a fox had got him, or perhaps he was trapped by a fallen bough. The screaming went on for perhaps twenty seconds, and as soon as I could shake off my paralysis I rushed through the bracken to the spot from where it seemed to come. I found nothing, and after a few

minutes I returned to my chair - playing peacefully in the dell were six cubs! The five had dived to earth when the screaming began but had re-emerged whilst I was away. No explanation seems to be forthcoming. Though I have listened to many badger parties - with the yapping sounding through the wood like the violent smashing up of wooden fence rails, I have only heard the scream in isolation.

Little is known of the meaning of the badgers many voices. But the yapping on autumn nights coincides so closely in its date of starting and of being discontinued, with the date of stopping and starting of the rutting bark or belling of the deer that it may well have the same mating significance.

One hears sometimes of a badger being tamed as a house pet. This seems all wrong to me. The real thrill of getting to know badgers is to know them in their own home setting - with just enough know-how and experience to see them whenever you feel the wish to do so, but leaving them enough of their own wild existence to preserve their fascination, with the mystery of their life and death below ground still intact and undisturbed, yet each year getting a little more knowledge of their work and ways.

T.J.Whall,

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Loughborough Naturalists' Club  
66, Outwoods Drive,  
Loughborough.