

## The Badger in Buckinghamshire



You will almost certainly have seen a badger, but quite likely it was dead, a sad bulky pile of mangled flesh and silver grey fur by the roadside. On a drive from Wycombe to Buckingham recently, I counted five unfortunate victims of roadkill. They are nocturnal creatures, rarely around in daylight hours, but at night time, frequently sighted, caught in the headlight, their broad stocky bodies bustling to safety across a carriageway; unfortunately, with their size and slowness, all too often they are struck by motorists who have not had time to take avoiding action. Even in times before the advent of motor traffic, badgers were at risk from human activity. George Gilbert Scott, writing of his early life at Gawcott in North Bucks, tells of a group of village men digging up the highway in an effort to bring death to a hapless creature. Badger baiting was an ancient pastime that was pursued into the twentieth century, and indeed may still be practiced – illegally - for they are a protected species.

My impression is that, though there is a high mortality rate from road traffic,, the population of badgers in Bucks remains high. What effect on numbers the fearsome summer drought of 2018 will have may be a matter of concern. A major source of food are earthworms, of which they may eat several hundred a night, but during this summer, there will be fewer worms, and they will have burrowed deep into the dry soil. Badgers also feed on other invertebrates, nuts, fruit, small vertebrates, bulbs and cereals, but most of these have become scarcer in the parching heat. With their their thick skin and long claws, they can kill and eat hedgehogs, but these have declined drastically in numbers over recent years.

What is also resulting in a high badger mortality is the government policy of

authorising culls. Badgers are carriers of Bovine Tuberculosis (bTB) - a disease that can be transmitted to cattle, and which therefore has a high economic impact on the farming industry. A means of controlling the disease must be found, so in 2013 the Government published its draft consultation document to eradicate bovine TB in England by authorising shooting and poisoning in the worst affected areas. This policy was strongly supported in the farming community. However, the **Bucks, Berks & Oxon Wildlife Trust** (BBOWT) opposes these badger culls as an impractical method of disease control that deals with only a small part of the bovine TB problem. BBOWT understands the fears of and sympathises with the farmers whose livelihoods may be affected by the spread of bTB, and agree that a means of controlling the disease must be found. However, the Trust, argues that the scientific evidence available does not support a cull, for that would not decrease incidences of bTB transmission from badgers to cattle, and would simply disperse badger populations to the detriment of the neighbouring areas where the disease may not currently be present. In April 2014 BBOWT set up a Mammal Project to vaccinate badgers on key BBOWT nature reserves. It argues that the scientific evidence is that vaccination is a more effective and a more humane way of controlling the disease.

No culls have yet been carried out in Bucks. The Government consultation document divided England into high and low risk areas, with an edge area between them. There have been culls within the past ten years in high risk areas in Wales and the south west of England where cattle rearing is especially significant to the rural economy. Buckinghamshire is fortunately a low risk area, so that there is unlikely to be any cull proposed at present. However, Western Oxfordshire, beyond Witney and Blenheim, no more than thirty kilometres from the Bucks border is a higher risk area where there is an incidence of bTB in cattle. Clearly, then, there is the possibility of the spread of the disease into our county, and the consequent threat of a cull being authorised in the future. For further information and facts about the science behind the badger culls, visit **The Wildlife Trusts** website, [www.wildlifetrusts.org](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org) and the **Bucks Berks and Oxon Wildlife** Trust website, [www.bbowt.org.uk](http://www.bbowt.org.uk) .

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