

## SHORT COMMUNICATION

# THE EFFECTS UPON BADGERS (*MELES MELES*) OF THE ACTIVITIES OF A SINGLE, PERSISTENT POACHER

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### Abstract

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*Although the hunters known as 'terrier men' are known to play a significant role in the illicit and cruel persecution of the badger in Britain, very little information is available upon their activities. In this study, detailed records of the hunting practices of a single terrier man, covering a period of seven years, are analysed. This provides the first insight into the activities of illegal badger-digging groups, and also emphasizes the extreme stress that may be caused to quarry species during the practice of this illegal sport.*

**Keywords:** *animal welfare, badgers, terrier men*

### Introduction

Legislative and perceptual attitudes to badgers (*Meles meles*) vary considerably between the different countries of Europe. In Britain the species has received progressively more stringent protection since 1973, and has become the emblem of the Royal Society for Nature Conservation and a symbol for the conservation movement as a whole. The badger is extremely popular with the general public, and large amounts of money are donated to fund the various badger conservation and welfare exercises undertaken by over 50 amateur badger protection societies. Similarly, in the Netherlands, the authorities regard the badger as an indicator of environmental health (J Wiertz pers comm) and the species is protected vigorously, both by law and by the actions of a highly effective, professional non-governmental conservation agency called Vereniging Das & Boom.

At the time of writing, badgers are protected in 14 European states (including two republics of the former Soviet Union), but in others the species is considered either as small game or as a pest, and is hunted or controlled accordingly (Griffiths & Thomas 1993). Despite the great legislative variations between these states, many proscribe hunting with dogs, and particularly stringent penalties may be applied when the sett is dug into or damaged during the hunting of its residents (Griffiths & Thomas 1993).

Those interested in the conservation and welfare of British and Irish badger populations have often claimed that a major source of illegal badger disturbance and killing is the activity of persons hunting badgers and cohabiting foxes with tunnel dogs (National Federation of Badger Groups 1990). The Irish national badger survey reports that an average of 10 per cent of all badger setts registered have been dug (Smal in press), while the British national survey reports signs of digging at 10.5 per cent of all main setts (Cresswell *et al* 1989). This British figure has been extrapolated by Cresswell *et al* (1989) into illegal kill statistics; the authors

claim that approximately 9,000 British badgers are illegally hunted each year. Although the British badger population is comparatively large at c 250,000 head, illicit hunting, coupled with intense road traffic mortality, are thought to place an intolerable burden of human-induced mortality upon badger populations.

The hunting of badgers with dogs is not a new phenomenon and some of the earliest hunting texts illustrate this form of hunting (eg Gaston Phébus c 1400). By the end of the nineteenth century, the hunting of badgers with earth dogs was considered a sport fit not only for the rural poor, but also for the wealthier classes (Pease 1898). In Britain and Ireland such sports largely focus on the hunting of foxes, but badgers are a traditional test of the courage, stamina, spirit and tenacity of the best-bred, most well-trained earth dogs (Pease 1898; Sparrow 1961). The working of earth dogs requires little capital investment and, during these times of economic recession and widespread male unemployment, seems to have become increasingly popular, both in the UK and Ireland, and in western France (L Lafontaine pers comm). Accounts of badger hunting with dogs are given by Pease (1898); Joly (1986); Meyer (1986), and Bourand (1989).

The advent of protective legislation for badgers has been met with dismay by the many devotees of these sports – the so-called terrier men (eg Harcombe 1985). In Britain there is now considerable public awareness of illegal badger hunting, particularly because of the continuing tradition of badger baiting. Despite being vilified by animal welfare workers and mainstream field sports enthusiasts alike, this medieval pastime, in which a captive badger is fought against a succession of dogs, does still have its followers. What proportion of illegally hunted badgers are actually victims of baiting will probably never be known, but it does seem that most captured badgers are killed, although some may be released, as claimed by Bourand (1989). It seems possible that where badger baiting does occur, it may also have links with the urban dog-fighting movement.

### **Objects of the study**

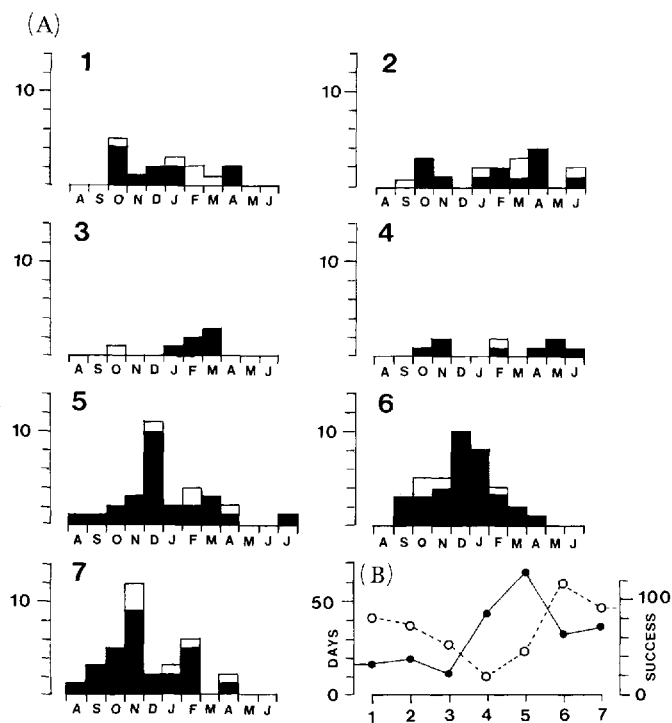
There have been few studies of the effects of hunting on badgers. One of the few exceptions is Lindsay and Macdonald's (1985) study of the effects of the blocking (stopping) of badger setts, usually undertaken to prevent foxes from taking refuge from equestrian fox hunts. In addition, a few authors have presented data on aspects of the incidence of illegal badger hunting in the UK: Griffiths (1991, 1992) provides details of the incidence of offences prosecuted by the police and on the effects of policing on badger offences; Reason *et al* (1993) identify foci of illegal persecution revealed by the national badger sett survey, and Peachey (1992) provides some case studies of convicted badger hunters. Unfortunately, in the last of these, coverage is partisan, and the data are almost useless.

The current study presents details of the activities of a single terrier man who was convicted of badger-related offences. Data are derived from written records and list illegal hunting activities over a period of seven hunting seasons within the 1980s. This individual (a male in his mid-twenties) hunted either alone, in the company of a small group of friends, or as a terrier man to various equestrian fox hunts. It should be emphasized, however, that there are no indications that the subject's illegal activities were undertaken with the knowledge of the fox hunts under whose protection he acted.

## Results

Much of the hunting activity recorded was undertaken within five miles of the subject's place of residence, often while he was alone. In the company of friends, the land of sympathetic farmers was used to host sporting activities. In such cases, the badger diggers often travelled between 70 to 100 miles to these safe hunting grounds. On occasion, groups travelled further afield for sporting weekends, these trips even including visits to neighbouring European Union countries. On these occasions local dogs would be used, and hunting was intense, not only of badgers, but also of other protected species, including otter (*Lutra lutra*).

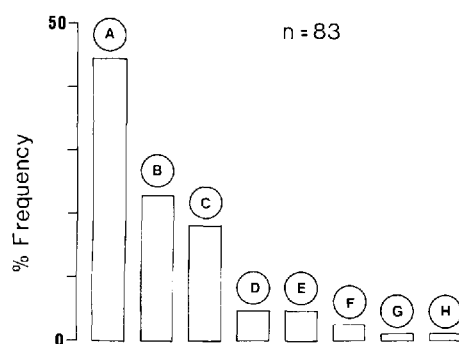
Figure 1 shows the patterns of illicit hunting recorded over a period of seven years. In each case the hunting year runs from August to August. Most badger hunting occurred between the months of November and January, the largest numbers of badgers being taken in November (mean =  $2.85 \pm 3.02$  badgers/month) and December (mean =  $3.43 \pm 4.57$  badgers/month). Badgers were taken in every month of the year, although hunting only took place in July during year five.



**Figure 1** Annual patterns of illegal badger hunting. A) Monthly attacks upon badgers in successive years (years 1-7): numbers of badgers captured (closed bars); numbers of badgers escaped (open bars). B) Illegal hunting effort and hunting success: numbers of hunting days/year (closed plots); number of badgers captured/100 hunting days (open plots).

Between these years hunter interest was highly erratic, ranging from only 11 hunting days/year in year 3, to 65 hunting days in year 5 (mean =  $32 \pm 17.33$  hunting days/year). Hunting activity peaked at 14 hunting days in one month (December, year 4) although this was exceptional. More usually, when hunting did take place, it occurred about once a week (mean =  $3.81 \pm 3.23$  hunting days/month). During this seven-year period 152 badgers were attacked, 126 of which were captured. The fates of the captured animals remain unknown. The total numbers of attempted badger captures are also erratic, ranging from seven animals in year 3 to 42 in year 6 (mean =  $22 \pm 12.19$  badgers/year). The majority of badgers attacked were captured (combined average = 86.59%), most of the remainder escaping by bolting from the sett. On a small number of occasions, badgers that bolted were captured by the use of running dogs, particularly lurchers. Overall hunting success rates (expressed as badgers captured/100 days of hunting $\cdot$ year $^{-1}$ ) ranged from 18.6 in year 4 to 115 in year 6 (mean =  $66.28 \pm 29.23$ ). Most successful hunting days resulted in the capture of a single badger although multiple captures were not unusual, and one hunting day resulted in the capture of five badgers (mean =  $1.28 \pm 0.66$  badgers/successful hunting day).

In the majority of cases (55.4% of those recorded) more than one dog was used in the hunting of a badger (Figure 2). From 83 analysable incidents, 44.6 per cent involved a single dog working alone, although the use of a succession of dogs working alone (maximum = 4) was also common (22.89% of all incidents), as was the use of a pair of dogs working in concert (18.1% of all incidents). These patterns largely reflect the numbers of persons involved, those present wishing to test their own dogs. This seems often to have led to disagreements, so that most digging was undertaken by small groups of men. The times taken in capturing a badger varied greatly, although the measurement of time is probably rather subjective. In one instance a badger was taken within 10 minutes but at the other extreme, a single dig lasted for six hours (360 minutes), with three dogs (two working together as a pair) being used in relay. The average time taken to capture a badger appears to be approximately 1.5 hours (mean =  $80.31 \pm 68.9$  minutes).



**Figure 2** Patterns of usage of dogs during badger digging. A = single dog only; B = sequence of dogs used singly; C = pair of dogs; D = two single dogs in succession; E = two pairs in succession; F = single dog and single pair; G = single dog and two pairs; H = succession of single dogs and two pairs.

## Discussion

In the world of respectable hunting, it is well known that a single dedicated hunter may take considerably more game than several less enthusiastic colleagues (Warner 1991). The subject of the current study is known to have committed criminal offences involving at least 152 different badgers alone, an average of 21.8 badgers/year. His success rate (although very variable) is roughly equivalent to that reported by the now disbanded organized otter hunts (Channin & Jefferies 1978). It is estimated that 9,000 badgers are taken illegally by terrier men each year in Britain, so that only 400 similarly enthusiastic individuals working their dogs could account for the illegal hunting attrition of British badger populations. Given the low chances of detection, and the apparent unwillingness of courts to impose the full penalties prescribed by badger protection laws (Griffiths 1992), it is difficult to see what will dissuade such persons from continuing to take badgers illegally. The penalties currently imposed certainly do not, and the author is aware of at least two men who have been convicted of badger offences on three separate occasions.

The terrier men have a strong subculture, as shown by the various magazines, books and periodicals catering to their interests. Most terrier men are law-abiding citizens, but within their ranks there seems to be a hard core, members of which regard defiance of the law a source of personal pride and who adopt self-justificatory stances to legitimize their actions, in much the same way as do other socially deviant groups (see Cohen 1971). These stances may be 'amplified' by those who apply the law (the police), by those who seek to protect the badger (the badger protection societies and animal welfare and conservation groups), and by the terrier men's own apologists. Peachey (1992) has argued that the inability of society to enforce badger protection legislation, and the unwillingness of various people to conform to it, recommend the decriminalization of badger offences. The same could be (and has been) said for many other criminal deviances, so this argument is obviously unacceptable in any reasonable society. A more realistic solution is the rigorous enforcement of the badger protection laws, coupled with vigorous implementation of their penalties. This, however, relies on political initiative and requires genuine will for change to achieve the desired ends.

### *Animal welfare implications*

These data clearly highlight the inherent cruelty of the practice of digging for badgers. Once entered into the badger sett, the dog should locate a badger and then hold it at bay in a blind-ended tunnel, sometimes being assisted in this by the use of iron staves to close off tunnel exits. This gives the hunters the opportunity to dig down to the terrier and capture the badger (see Bourand 1989).

During the period of the dig both dog and badger are surely under stress, and any actual contact between them will almost certainly result in injury. Several dogs were recorded as being injured during hunts by the subject, one dog was euthanased after losing all its teeth in combat, and another for cowardice. If a badger should manage to escape, it may be expected to be both physiologically and psychologically distressed. In addition to possible injuries such as damage to teeth or soft tissues, any open wounds offer possibilities for infection, or fly strike and myiasis in hot weather (cf Porkert 1964). The digging of badgers thus results in both prolonged periods of antagonistic, stressful contact between the badger

and the hunting dog(s), and damage to the badger sett, often a structure of considerable antiquity (Roper 1992). If the badger is captured, then a variety of fates may await it: perhaps release, or more likely dispatch, possibly baiting, or even being sold on to dog fighters.

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