

# Sett surveying and reporting : Oxfordshire Badger Group

## 1 Purpose

Oxfordshire Badger Group (OBG) works to maintain accurate and up-to-date records of the location of badger setts and other evidence of activity (such as sightings both live and dead). Record keeping began in the early 1970's and go back over five decades. Maintaining them is a continual task as new setts are identified and existing ones change or fall out of use. The records are held in strict confidence. They underpin our charitable work by enabling us to:

- Plan our vaccination programme
- Locate setts close by a rescue or crime scene e.g. for badger rehabilitation or to check for abandoned cubs or animals at immediate risk
- Identify and respond to developments and works likely to affect badgers;
- Understand the threats and challenges to badgers, including road accident or crime hot spots;
- Liaise with police and others on crime reports;
- Offer tailored advice & guidance to the public;
- Respond to professional requests for information;
- Prioritise our sett surveying work; and
- Participate in ecological research

Sett surveying is an enjoyable and worthwhile recreational activity that most people can usefully add to their walks. Learning to spot evidence of badger activity, recording their setts and their impact on the environment will add greatly to your enjoyment and understanding of nature.

It is well worth keeping a diary of sett visits. It also is interesting to see how sett use changes over time. Volunteers who regularly visit a sett may want to keep evidence that it is continuing in 'current use' by documenting signs of occupation by badgers at each visit. Keeping detailed repeat survey records can be valuable if the sett is vulnerable and may be used as evidence of occupation in the event of a crime case (digging or blocking etc).

## 2 Scope

Badger sett surveying and reporting to OBG.

## 3 Responsibilities

Always put your own safety and that of others first - be ready to change your plans as necessary. Please read the attached risk assessment and actively apply this to your current situation.

Follow the [Countryside Code](#) and applicable legislation <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-countryside-code>.

Obtain the landowner or tenants permission to visit setts on private land. Do not knowingly trespass.

Report the results of your sett survey accurately and promptly to OBG using the forms provided.

If checking a new sett liaise with our Records Officer or team leader to agree the areas you plan to cover. They may be able to provide details of the location of known setts or sighting data for your confidential use.

### Confidentiality

It is good to share our love of badgers but remember that we keep sett locations highly confidential. Please do not publicise in any form or disclose to any third party, details of the location of surveying and any setts or signs of badgers found. If sharing on social media or other public channels, first check that pictures of setts or signs do not contain visual or digital location identifiers. If you are approached for details (where can I watch badgers, are there setts nearby and so on) be sure you trust the person and encourage them to join OBG. Professional enquiries should be passed to the records officer who will deal.

## 4 Training and support

This guidance is intended for use by suitably trained and experienced people. Please familiarise yourself with this protocol and the recommended reading. Setts surveying is best learned in the field - OBG organises training periodically. Contact OBG if you need other advice or support for example:

- arranging a training session or experienced 'buddy' to go with you at first
- Back up and advice if you expect or run into difficulties in the field
- Help getting more boots on the ground for larger or more complex surveys
- Identifying or negotiating access with landowner

## 5 Equipment & materials

- A map of the survey area (Ideally with any known setts or sightings marked)
- Setts record form & pen
- Mobile phone, ideally with camera, GPS locator app ( e.g. what3words / Grid Reference Finder) and OBG contact numbers. (Or camera, pen and paper, and local map).

Also consider:

- PPE (mask and gloves)
- Disinfectant spray/ wipes
- OBG business cards
- Trail cams

## 6 When to survey – and where

Badger sett/ activity surveys can be performed anytime by anyone – just keep your eyes open for badger signs and check out any that you see when out and about.

Full surveys are best done in the winter or spring when vegetation has died back. This makes it easier to find small holes, latrines and tracks. However, badger activity is often reduced at this time and signs of recent activity (such as paw prints or bedding) may be limited. During high summer setts may be rendered less easy to see by thick growth of brambles and nettles. Holes are more likely to be hidden increasing the risk of falls.

We ask members to check 'their local areas' for badger setts and signs and to keep an eye on any known setts periodically. Your local area might be land that you own or regularly visit. In built up areas it might be an urban street or neighbourhood, including gardens and public spaces.

In addition to this, OBG may ask members to go survey a designated area. We aim to cover areas where we don't yet have survey records or where existing records need to be updated. Also there may be a specific 'need to know' – for example if we have been invited to do a badger survey, or the area is designated for development or there are other reasons to think badgers might be present or at risk (such as a sighting, crime or casualty report in the area).

## 7 Planning your survey and getting permissions

Time spent doing a 'desk survey' can help for a more productive and enjoyable visit. We recommend checking the map and planning your route – where to meet/ park; access routes; known badger setts and sighting records; refreshment spots; most likely sett locations.

Do you need permission? Many places can be viewed from public roads, bridleways and footpaths, but only a small proportion of setts can be found in this way.

Always obtain the landowners permission before visiting a sett on private land. This may take some time and you should offer to let them know the details (who is visiting, when and the outcome). Gaining permission and sharing your findings – or walking the land in their company - may encourage the landowner to protect "their" badgers against possible threats. The landowner may decline without giving a reason. It will have done no harm to let them know the local badger group is active in the area. If unsure how to go about this please ask for advice.

OBG has sett records going back many years, including many that were recorded with the landowners' permission at the time. If you are asked to update a sett record please only do so if it is still accessible. If you are unable to obtain permission, please record that you were unable to check the sett location since there is no public access.

## 8 What to look for

Our aim is to survey for evidence of badger activity – either to confirm that the area of interest is badger territory or to exclude the presence of badgers. Members undertaking this work should be familiar with badger signs or be accompanied by someone who is more experienced. Please do your homework !

Assuming you have free access, ideally aim to do a thorough check of areas of woodland, scrub, road verges, ditch embankments, streams and around field boundaries. Working as a team may make this easier and safer. Setts may exist in all of these places and outlier setts can exist at the base of field boundaries such as walls and hedgerows, irrespective of the type of crop in it.

Checking the corners of fields may also reveal badger paths or latrines. Be alert to all badger signs (such as push throughs, snuffle holes, hair, scratch post marks or paw prints) as these will show the badgers territory and may lead toward the sett's location. Always check mounds of exposed soil since these are often found below holes that may otherwise be hidden.

Once the sett is found try to get a complete picture of activity. There is often more than one sett and these may be connected by badger paths or tracks.

## 9 Is it really badger?

As the [Scottish Badger Guidance to surveying says](#), many animals live in holes in the ground, each leaving distinctive clues to give away their identity. You just need to try and establish if you are looking at a badger sett and if so, whether badgers are occupying it.

Spend some time investigating each tunnel, note its' shape and size as well as the presence of paw prints or bedding.

Examine spoil heaps – these may be extensive and show evidence of fresh digging. Look for badger hair. Occasionally you may find badger bones (they often return to the sett when ill or injured).

Look for evidence the hole might be dug (or is being used by) other animals – rabbit droppings, the smell of fox. A sett complex may be 'shared occupancy'. If not sure you've found a badger sett - say so in your report.

## 10 Reporting your findings

Please familiarise yourself with our online reporting system at <https://www.oxonbadgergroup.org.uk/report/> Survey reports can be submitted via this portal. If you want to supply photos or a copy survey report form please email them as soon as possible to our records Officer via [settrecords.oxonbadgergroup@gmail.com](mailto:settrecords.oxonbadgergroup@gmail.com) and [vaccinate@oxonbadgergroup.org.uk](mailto:vaccinate@oxonbadgergroup.org.uk).

Aim to get as much information as possible at the visit. Don't rely on memory. Use a GPS and/or annotate a few notes on the location of each latrine, sett or other notable signs you go. Take photos where these will be helpful. At this stage don't worry about trying to classify the setts based on levels of activity (e.g. main, annex, subsidiary, outlier or abandoned). This may change seasonally or as other setts may still to be discovered.

Our recording form can be intimidating but these are the essentials to look for and report:

- The evidence that supports your opinion that it is a badger sett and whether it is in use
- The number of tunnel entrances that are active and the number appearing inactive
- The presence and use (recent or older) of latrines;
- The presence of fresh bedding
- Some pictures of the sett entrance with some indicator of scale (e.g. a pen)
- Accurate location and a description of the site that will help anyone find it again (features that are likely to remain regardless of the season)

Please report all badger surveys, including the 'no shows' e.g. sites where:

- there is evidence of activity but the sett could not be found;
- no signs of badger presence found in the survey area
- No public access or the landowner declined to allow access for a badger survey

You may save someone else the trouble and help us focus on land that has not yet been surveyed !

## 11 Monitoring: trail cameras and Repeat visits

Depending on your reason for surveying, it may be important to confirm that badgers are using the sett. You may want to consider any or all of the following:

- Soft blocking – putting a stick or other light vegetation barrier at the entrance to the hole(s) will show if an animal has moved it aside (you will need to visit again next day or ASAP)
- Badger watching
- Deployment of trail cameras (with warning notices if necessary)

Members who are acting on behalf of OBG may want to discuss this with a member of the committee in advance. In any event, the landowners permission should be obtained where appropriate.

## 12 Biosecurity

Please refer to the latest government guidance on COVID-19 and see the attached Risk Assessment.

## 13 Wildlife crime and emergencies

Please see our guide (OBG\_034) and also : <https://www.oxonbadgergroup.org.uk/report/emergencies/> and/or the **Badger Trust**: <https://www.badgertrust.org.uk/report>

## 14 Related documents and recommended reading

Sett mapping detailed report form	OGB_030
Guide to badger watching	OGB_037
Wildlife crime reporting guide	OGB_034

**OBG Guide to Badger Field signs** is published at: <https://www.oxonbadgergroup.org.uk/videos/>

**The Countryside Code for the public** (updated April 2021) is at:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-countryside-code>

**Coronavirus (COVID-19): Surveying and mitigation works affecting wildlife**, Natural England/ DEFRA  
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-surveying-and-mitigation-works-affecting-wildlife>

**Surveying for Badgers Good Practice Guidelines**, published by Scottish Badgers 2020.  
[https://www.scottishbadgers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Surveying-for-Badgers-Good-Practice-Guidelines\\_V1-2020-2455979.pdf](https://www.scottishbadgers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Surveying-for-Badgers-Good-Practice-Guidelines_V1-2020-2455979.pdf)

**Badgers: Surveys and Mitigation for Development Projects**. Standing advice for local planning authorities who need to assess the impacts of development on badgers. Natural England, 2015  
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/badgers-surveys-and-mitigation-for-development-projects> .

**Surveying Badgers (The Mammal Society)**, Good Practice Guidance. download at:  
<https://ciem.net/resource/surveying-badgers-the-mammal-society/>

## Oxfordshire Badger Group: Risk Assessment for <activity>:

**Scope:** Surveying for badger setts and their habitats typically involves 'fieldwork' - walking along country footpaths, but may take place in urban areas. It may be performed alone or in company. Generally the activity is recreational and planned to take place in good light and weather conditions – which may change. This assessment assumes a volunteer will be familiar with, and follow the general principles of the Countryside Code published by Natural England.

Hazard	Risk	Control
Field work location Terrain, environment and access	Risk of injury or other difficulties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Volunteers should be reasonably physically fit and capable</li> <li>Remember your duty not to put yourself or others in danger.</li> <li>Assess conditions before and during the session. Be prepared to cut short the walk if necessary.</li> <li>Wear appropriate clothes ( think brambles, nettles , wet etc).</li> </ul>
Slips & trips – most common cause of injury	<p>Risk of slipping or tripping on uneven or treacherous ground.</p> <p>Badger setts have large, deep holes which may be hidden or could collapse.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wear suitable footwear e.g. walking boots.</li> <li>Check the sett area carefully for holes and avoid stepping in them. Consider using a walking stick where there is a lot of ground cover.</li> <li>Look out for other obstructions and move these if possible.</li> <li>Be alert to ground conditions, and take care in slippery, unstable, steep or uneven areas etc.</li> </ul>
Low light levels, & working at night	Increases the likelihood of a risk happening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sett surveying should take place in daylight. Cut the session short if light conditions become too poor.</li> <li>If planning to combine with badger watching or monitoring (pre-dawn or after dusk) carry a suitable torch and scope the sett in good light beforehand.</li> </ul>
Poor weather conditions	Increases the likelihood of a risk happening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Take note of the weather conditions and forecast. If unsuitable then defer or cut short the session</li> </ul>
Manual handling.	Risk of strains and sprains when lifting and carrying equipment is low/ negligible. Sett surveying in the field involves very little manual handling e.g. a light backpack.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Volunteers to see Manual Handling Guide (OBG_027).</li> </ul>
Biohazards when working close to an occupied badger sett or looking for signs of activity.	Risk of infection due to exposure to hazardous micro-organisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Masks to be worn when working within 2 m of a badger sett.</li> <li>Disposable gloves to be worn when checking a sett (e.g for hair).</li> <li>Cover cuts or abrasions on exposed skin with waterproof dressings.</li> <li>Good personal hygiene - wash hands thoroughly before and after the session &amp; before eating or drinking.</li> </ul>

Badgers (and most other wildlife) can carry infectious diseases, including bTB.  Oxfordshire is a bTB Edge area and it is thought very few badgers have bTB.	Microorganisms such as bTB can remain viable in the soil (cattle slurry or badger poo) for a considerable time.	<b>Note:</b> OBG 3 <sup>rd</sup> party Insurance DOES NOT cover volunteers against getting an infectious disease.
Livestock	Risk of injury to people  risk of property damage or livestock injury	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross fields with livestock quietly and calmly, keeping together. Be prepared to divert around livestock if necessary.</li> <li>• Follow the countryside Code. Leave gates and property as you find them. Keep dogs on a lead.</li> </ul>
Members of the public and landowners	May hamper your work or put themselves at risk.  Landowners or their staff may be uncooperative or threatening.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be polite and calmly assertive at all times.</li> <li>• Obtain permission from the landowner if necessary and comply with their requests.</li> </ul>
Lone working.	Increases likelihood of risks happening.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Always ensure someone knows your plans. OBG members can provide backup (via mobile phone/ WhatsApp) if needed.</li> </ul>

## 15 Document approval and change history

**Protocol and Risk Assessment** authored by Linda Ward. Reviewed and approved by Debbie White and Eileen Anderson for OBG Committee.

**Issue date:** 17 Oct 2021.

**Review date:** - 2 year default

**Change history:** Not applicable, this is the first formal sett survey guide.