

Chapter 16

After a while enjoying the countryside, looking at the spring wildflowers that they could find, scattered across the countryside, the two men began to descend the hillside. They eventually reached the farm and bundled into Jason's vehicle. They knew they had an important date that evening.



A little later, they pulled into Dan's drive. A knock at the door was quickly answered, and the two men entered. Dan greeted them and led them into the cosy lounge. Lucy flitted in and out with a cheery 'hello'. Greg, it seemed, was upstairs, judging by the sound of a TV football match coming from above.

"Well, guys, we did it!" said Dan, looking very pleased. "We are so grateful for the work you've done for us around here. We know you've scouted the area and worked hard with the police to sort our problems out."

"Well, the police team have been great. Forensics gave us good leads. The new system Durham Police have for tracking criminals around the country has helped enormously too. It means we can track a villain around Britain in a matter of seconds, rather than the hours it used to take. I gather they got an award for it." (This system does exist. It is NOT fictional.)



"Yeah, it's just a matter of all pulling together, and then we usually end up on the winning side," added Will. "What the criminals forget is that we only have to get lucky once to nick them. They have to get lucky every time to avoid it!"

"The Badger Group have done a great job too," said Jason. "Without people like you, our job would be so much more difficult."

At that moment, Annie, Dan's wife popped her head around the door. "Dinner is served," she announced. The three men rose and followed her into the dining room. Lucy was shouting up the stairs to Greg to come and eat. A grunt was heard in reply, as the TV went quiet. "He won't miss food, even for football," Annie chuckled.



A thunder of feet could be heard on the stairs, and Greg burst through the door. "What's for dinner?" he gasped.

"Sit down and you might find out," teased Lucy.

"So, what's the score?" asked Dan.

"Sunderland 2 Man Utd 0," Greg grinned. "Only minutes to go too!" Dan nodded approvingly.

A beautiful Thai Green Curry later, and the group sat back satisfied. "Annie, that was great!" enthused Jason.

"Certainly was," agreed Will. "Thanks for a lovely meal."

"Well," said Dan. "Time we got going." The group arose from the table. Jason moved to carry the dinner plates into the kitchen. "Oh, leave them," said Dan. "Lucy and Greg are going to do them." The two teenagers dropped their jaws. The adults chuckled and left them to it. "You two have seen it all before," their father added. "Our turn tonight."

"And don't forget the homework," said Annie.

"I handed in my project work yesterday," replied Lucy. "No more now until the next module."

"Got mine out of the way before the footie," added Greg. "You just can't concentrate on the footie when you have homework to do!" he grinned.

"Hm. Nothing like getting your priorities right," laughed his father.

Dressed in lots of layers for warmth, (the layers trap air between them to keep you warm), with dark clothes that wouldn't rustle when they moved, and with no sign of perfumes or aftershaves, the small group clambered aboard Dan's 4x4 and headed off to their special date with a group of nocturnal creatures, for whom the 'day' was just beginning.

The group drove on. They needed to get to the woodland before dusk, as the badgers might be considering getting up and about at that time.



HOW TO SPOT BADGERS

How big are badgers? 65 - 80cm long. About the same as a medium-sized dog.

How would I recognise a badger? Badgers are stocky animals with heavy bodies that look a bit fat, (but aren't). They have short, black legs. Their coat has a grizzled grey look. The head is broad white with black stripes from the muzzle, over the eyes to the ears. The short tail is white.

When will I see them? Badgers are active all year round. They do NOT hibernate, though they are much less active during the winter months. Badgers are nocturnal and are most active around dawn and dusk. They will often come out during daylight in the summer, to groom, play and sunbathe. Badgers in country areas will be more likely to come out earlier than those closer to civilisation and therefore disturbance. They will not come out if they hear people or dogs in the area. Their eyesight is poor and they can almost bump into you before they know you're there. However, their hearing and sense of smell is fantastic. If you are up-wind, they will smell you from a long distance. They will hear the slightest sound you make.

Where will I find them? Badgers like woodlands and pastures. Here they hunt for earthworms. They are being increasingly seen in urban areas, where they can find a living on golf courses, gardens, railway embankments, etc.

What should I look for? Look for large holes in the ground. They are the shape of a capital D on its side. (A sort of arch.) They are often dug in sloping ground or in rocks. The entrances are marked by large heaps of soil mingled with hay and leaf bedding. You'll probably see pathways leading away from the sett. You might find a dung pit, or a snuffle hole where the badgers have been rooting for worms. Look for badger hair on barbed wire fences. If there are trees around, especially elder, you might look for scratch marks on the bark. (We don't know why they like elder.)

What should I listen for? Badgers make a wide range of calls, including growls, clicks, snorts, moans and whines. Cubs often make a lot of whickering noises as they romp around.

Badger behaviour Badgers usually emerge around dusk and spend a little time near to the safety of the sett, grooming and checking for danger. They will often play together before moving off to forage alone. They might feed close to the sett, but they can travel long distances. It all depends upon how available food is in their territory.

Tracks Badgers leave large prints, about 4cm wide and 5c, long. Kidney bean-shaped pads. There are five toes and claws.

Droppings Large, lumpy sausages or runny mounds. They are usually black or brown and left in a shallow pit, close to paths and the edges of their territory. The colour depends upon their diet. Dark poo means they've fed on worms, etc. Light brown shows cereals have been eaten. Dark blue or purple in autumn means they've found berries. (You might also find bees and wasps in the poo! Badger Vindaloo? *Some* badgers will also eat hedgehogs out of their skins! Sorry, but it's true!

On reaching a rather nice piece of woodland, the four got out of the car, checked the wind direction and slowly and quietly made their way, towards the wind, through the wood. They were careful to try to avoid stepping on sticks that might crack and alert the local wildlife to the fact that they were there. It would just take one deer to bark and everything would go quiet for a good while.

They arrived at the sett, staying a good distance away, and settled down with their backs to trees to wait. And wait they did. Nothing happened for a good while, except for the birds flitting around, going about their business of feeding up and finding a roost for the night.

The sett was quite near to the edge of the wood, bordering on a pasture where a dozen cows grazed contentedly. It was ideal badger territory. The wood sloped down to a stream – the slope allowing the badgers to dig deeply very quickly. The edge, or ecotone, between the two habitats was close. The pasture land would be ideal foraging territory for the badgers, and 'snuffle holes' would be very evident, where the badgers 'drilled' into the ground for the worms.

After a wait, their patience was at last rewarded with the sighting of the first badgers to emerge. The first thing they noticed was a black and white snout poking out from a sett entrance. It sniffed the air carefully, before hauling its body from the hole. Still cautious, it clambered up the bank of the spoil heap and looked around, listened and sniffed at the air. The four badger watchers held their breath, hoping that they wouldn't be noticed.



Luckily, the badger didn't seem to know that it was being watched intently from such a close distance. Without any natural predators in this country, man and his dogs is usually the badger's greatest enemy. These badgers couldn't know that these people were actually their greatest friends. Unfortunately, wildlife tends to lump all of us together under the heading 'Dangerous – not to be trusted!'



More badgers began to emerge cautiously from the sett. They sat around for a while, stretching and grooming themselves and each other. One large badger presented his rump end and rubbed it on the flanks of another badger. The group knew that what was happening was scent-marking. The badgers would mark each other with their own scent, making a 'group smell'. When they met again, in the gloom, the scent would tell them that they'd bumped into a friend, and not a badger from a neighbouring territory, which could cause problems!



The badger group had spread around a few handfuls of peanuts, to keep the badgers interested for a little while. A few handfuls wouldn't really blunt their appetite for their natural food, and was the same as giving a child a few sweets, though much more nutritious.

The group were delighted when Mum appeared at the top of the sett with three cubs in tow. They soon began to examine the peanuts, before wolfing them down. They then began the night's play! They ran around and chased each other, tumbling and rolling in mock fights. They clambered over logs, seeming to proclaim, "I'm the king of the castle," until a brother or sister knocked them from their perch.



Jason was delighted when a badger came very close, and foraged for food just centimetres from where he was sitting. The badger either didn't notice him, or simply judged that this particular human was no threat.

The young badger approached Jason's boot and sniffed at the new addition to its territory. Jason just couldn't believe that he'd ever get this close to such a beautiful wild animal, on its terms, in its own territory. What an honour, to be allowed to do this by such a wild creature. It almost brought



a tear to his eye. After a further brief inspection of the visitors, the young animal trundled off into the night, probably with juicy worms on its mind.

A short while later, the rest of the clan also made their way out into their territory to begin the night's feeding. At last the group felt that they could breathe again, and shoulders slumped; the tension leaving them, but with the night's excitement still racing through their minds.

"Wow!" breathed Will. "I can't believe I was that close to a clan of badgers!"

"Beats watching the telly or playing on computer games, doesn't it?" said Dan.

"No contest!" affirmed Jason. "I could do this every night of the week."



When they were absolutely certain that all of the badgers had left the area to forage for the night, the four gathered up their things and quietly exited the wood. On the way out, a pair of tawny owls could be heard – the male with his *Toowit* and the female with her *Whooooo* reply. They drove back quietly to Dan's: each person lost with their thoughts about the evening.

Upon arrival, they filed back in to enjoy a warming cup, and chatted to the two children about what they'd seen. A short while later, Jason and Will took their leave of the family. There were handshakes all round, and a hug for Jason and Will from Lucy. "Thank you for helping us," she said. The agents assured her that it had been a pleasure.

They clambered into their vehicles and set off for home. Homes they hadn't seen for a while. It had been a great adventure, but it would be nice to be back to a warm bed and the comforts of home rather than camp.

A short while later, Dan, Jason and Will were back in Manchester, at the Crown Court to hear the proceedings against the badger baiting gang. They would all have to give evidence at the trial, they knew.

The defendants filed in and stood in the dock.



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The other people involved - the teenagers, the business men and the councillor, would be dealt with on another day.

Suddenly, thought Dan, they just don't look quite as confident as they did, when they were the 'tough guys'. They eyed the court nervously, knowing what fate had in store for them.



The proceedings didn't take long. The three men, and others involved in the capture of the gang gave their evidence. It was pretty much an open and shut case. The judge brought down his gavel and passed long prison sentences on all of the men – taking into account all of the offences they had committed, including the supply of class A drugs.



The thugs stood with heads down as the judge spoke. Then they were led

from the dock to begin their sentences.



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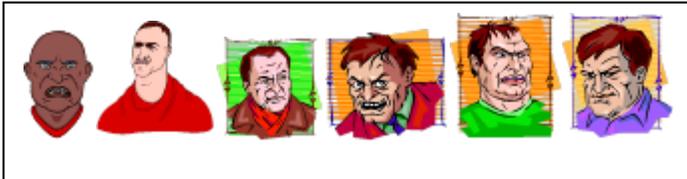
The following day, a report appeared in the Northern Bugle:

Northern Bugle

Six Men Convicted of Badger Digging and Baiting

A judge condemned the so-called ‘sport’ of badger digging and baiting as “barbaric”, as he jailed six men who dug out badgers in County Durham. More men in Manchester are awaiting trial, as are two teenagers from County Durham.

The men had tried to dig out badgers at a sett in Weardale, but were foiled by the excellent work of Durham Badger Group, Durham Police and the RSPCA Special Operations Unit. Leader of the gang Vince Gross, along with Sean O’Vile, brothers Sam and Bill Mean, Mal Evolent and Cal Lous were jailed for



differing sentences for the badger baiting and for intention to supply Class A drugs.

They were found guilty of wilfully killing badgers, hunting a mammal with dogs, digging for badgers and interfering with a badger sett.

The teenage boys are expected to be given youth rehabilitation orders, when found guilty of aiding and abetting the men.

Sentencing the group, Judge Justness said: “The people of Manchester and Durham will not tolerate badger baiting. It is evil and barbaric, and anyone found guilty of this kind of offence will receive a custodial sentence. This must be a clear signal to others who try to commit horrible offences like this.”

Speaking after the trial, an RSPCA Special Operations Agent, who can’t be named, said, “This is the highest level of animal cruelty. These men deserve to go down for a long time!”

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<http://www.durhamcountybadgers.co.uk>



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DURHAM

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Well, life gradually returned to normal for Durham Badger Group, though they could never afford to let down their guard. No one knows when the next emergency might arise.

Durham Police continue their job of fighting crime wherever it raises its ugly head.

As for Jason and Will, they returned to their jobs with the RSPCA Special Operations Unit. More cases would soon come up for them to crack.



As for the last word, it's probably best to leave that to the real stars of the show.

"Thanks for looking after us!"

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Grateful thanks to Dave Sumpton for his great photos.

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