

The badger

A great deal of up-to-date information is packed into this welcome addition to the Mammal Society series. Appearances, senses, signs of presence, distribution, habitat, social life, behaviour, food, breeding and population density are all dealt with.

Badgers are much commoner than was thought 20 years ago, and the British population is estimated to be around 250,000 adults, living in 45,000 social groups. As our largest carnivore (up to 17kg), and a powerful animal, an adult badger has no natural enemies in Britain apart from man – but the annual mortality in the adult population is still some 30 per cent. About 47,000 adults and cubs are killed on roads every year, and a further 10,000 are victims of the cruel and illegal practice of badger digging and baiting. Cubs may be killed by dogs, foxes or other badgers; many die in the summer when food is scarce, and fewer than 50 per cent survive their first year. Few badgers live more than six years.

Bovine tuberculosis is not a major cause of mortality in badgers, but since the 1970s this species has been recognized as the main wildlife reservoir of the disease. The government programme of killing badgers in areas where tuberculosis-infected cattle are slaughtered and badgers are believed to be implicated in spreading the disease, is described rationally. But there is no suggestion that killing badgers is the remedy for the tuberculosis problem, which may indeed be aggravated by the disruption of badger populations. The Ministry of Agriculture's efforts to develop a tuberculosis vaccine for badgers is thought to be a more likely solution in the long-term.

A final section on conservation deals sympathetically with the legislation that protects badgers and their setts, the licences available for removing or killing badgers for legitimate reasons, the problems involved in relocating badgers and the reduction of road mortality.

The booklet is well illustrated by photographs, mostly taken by the author, and drawings by Frankie Woods.

Michael Woods (1995). *The Mammal Society*: London. 24pp. Paperback. Obtainable from the publishers, 15 Cloisters Business Centre, 8 Battersea Park Road, London SW8 4BG, UK (ISBN 0 906282 31 4). Price £2.50 plus 50p postage and packaging.

Broiler welfare

Each year in the UK some 700 million broiler birds are reared, killed and eaten. The size of this broiler industry ensures that if there are welfare problems then they have the potential to be on an immense scale.

It is recognized that the modern broiler chicken does not need to have its beak trimmed to control feather pecking/cannibalism and that it can be kept on a littered floor with freedom to forage. These are both positive welfare points. However, there is a problem with the bird growing beyond the capacity of the legs to support its heavy body. This can lead to the development of painful breast and leg lesions. This genetic selection for rapid growth in the young animal can also result in adult breeding stock having to be kept on short rations, ie in a state of chronic hunger, to stop them becoming seriously overweight.

The gathering-up, transport and slaughter of broiler birds is also thought, at times, to cause serious welfare problems.