

BADGERLANDS

Also by Patrick Barkham

The Butterfly Isles

BADGERLANDS

The Twilight World of Britain's
Most Enigmatic Animal

Patrick Barkham

GRANTA

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For my mum, Suzanne

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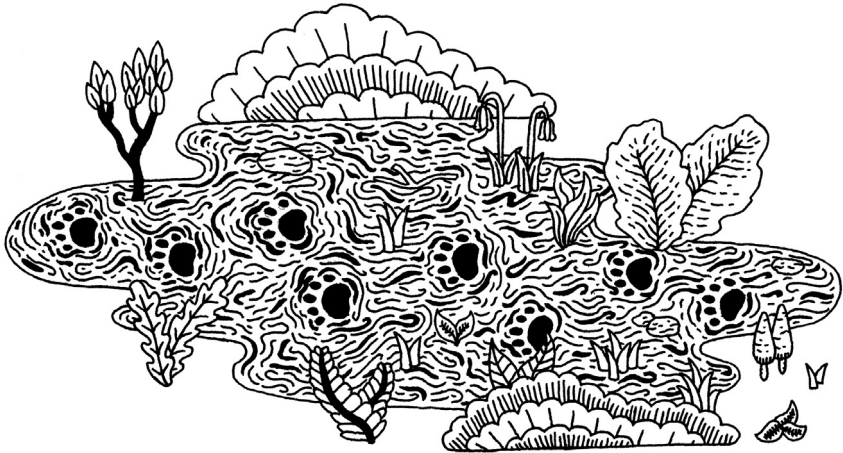
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Black-and-White



There was a thin film of ice on the car windscreen when I stepped outside the farmhouse at a quarter to ten. The sky was mad with stars and the bare branches were bullied by the wind that blew in from the east. The hillside was dusty black, its hedges a darker line of pencil; at the top blinked the four red lights of a tall transmitter on the heights of the Mendips; lower down, a lane snaked around a wooded bulge in the slope, a belt around an expanding belly. A solitary pair of headlights swept between the wintry hedges and then disappeared over the horizon.

I had ventured out on a bleak March night to look for badgers. With its reputation for sorcery and subterranean dwellings, Wookey Hole seemed a particularly good place to begin. I was seeking badgers not in the village's famous caves, home to a vaguely human-shaped stalagmite called the Witch of Wookey Hole and now an amusement park, but on a small farm just outside the village in Somerset. The farm was owned by Nick Lee, a short, smiley man with strong fingers

and deep wrinkles that gathered shrewdly around his eyes. He had sold his dairy cows a few years ago and badgers, widely blamed by many who work the land for spreading bovine TB among cattle, had something to do with it. Now, Nick and his wife Sue got by on a bit of everything: beef cattle, bed-and-breakfast, camping. They also tolerated a couple of badger setts on their land and told me where to find them.

One of the less well-known caves above the Wookey ravine is called Badger Hole. The badger, and its other old names – brock, pate, grey, bawson, billy, black-and-white – are written into our landscape: Badger in Shropshire, Brocklebank in the Lake District, Grayswood in Surrey, Badgers Mount in Kent, Broxbourne in Hertfordshire. At least 140 Anglo-Saxon place names originate from *broc*. There are a fair number of fox-related place names but, apart from the odd hamlet called Rattery and a brace of Pigeon Lanes, few other species have such a strong linguistic presence in human habitations. We might imagine this shows the esteem in which we hold this most independent of wild animals, but the history of our dealings with the badger over the centuries is one of relentless brutality. This, too, is revealed in our language, in the origin of the verb ‘to badger’.

Our country has not merely been named after badgers; it has been shaped by them. Badgers’ spectacular earthworks have changed the lines of hedgerows, turned pasture into woodland, and forced farmers to abandon or at least reconsider the way they farm their land. A higher density of badgers lives in Britain than anywhere else in the world. The badger is our biggest surviving carnivore, although, like us,

it is omnivorous, and there are plenty of vegetarian badgers. Over the centuries, we have driven more formidable species – bears, wolves, lynx – to extinction, but the badger has endured. Perhaps it is because we are so oblivious to these sylvan animals living quietly all around us.

This is odd because the badger is an unmistakable beast, the very opposite of a camouflaged creature. The size of a spaniel that has been completely reshaped, it has supremely powerful claws, the hulking neck of a body-builder and, of course, that fright mask: the long white face burnished by two black stripes. Badger hair is actually white and only the tip of its guard hairs, which form a protective outer layer, is black. This gives it a grey appearance but its face badge shows up like a beacon in the gloom of a wood at night, long after it has become impossible to pick out a fox or deer. And yet it is astonishing how rarely we see a badger, and how little most of us know about its habits and natural history.

At various points in my life I had passed through badgery places such as Brockley and Pately Bridge; I read about the adventures of Mr Badger in *The Wind in the Willows* as a child, and as an adult drank a pint in the Fat Badger pub in West London, now sadly replaced by a pizzeria; I had followed those brown road signs adorned with the badger's mask that signify a nature reserve; bid for a yellowed stuffed badger on eBay, and mooched past their underground setts; but, like so many people, I had barely seen a wild badger. Dead ones, of course, shunted and rolled into the gutter, stumpy legs at wonky angles after they had stubbornly faced down an onrushing car and come off second best. Plenty of lifeless badgers. But in all my years growing up

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in the countryside, I had caught a glimpse of a live badger only at odd moments when I had taken a turning away from normal life and entered a strange, nocturnal universe. Badgerland.

Until I began to seek out the parallel world populated by badgers, my lifelong record had been three fleeting sightings. Once, bleary-eyed, I hailed a taxi to escape the mayhem of Glastonbury Festival and saw a low-slung shape cross the lane as we drove through the Polden Hills. The first live badger of my life, at the age of twenty-nine. Another time, an accident blocked the M1 and I veered off at a random junction and meandered, lost, along a B-road in Northamptonshire. A badger was picked out in my lights as it made its nightly perambulation. A third I stumbled upon in daylight when my dad and I were traipsing knee-deep through a hazardous bog on Dartmoor. The dead bracken shook in front of us as a badger – resting up outdoors in the late afternoon – dashed away with unexpected speed.

My grandma would have been disappointed that I had reached the middle of my life and spent so little time with badgers. Jane Ratcliffe, my mum's mother, was obsessed with them. She had a skull on her sideboard and a special badger gate in the dry-stone wall between her garden and the wood. With her large glasses and white hair, Grandma looked a bit like an owl, and even more so when she spent long evenings perched up a tree, watching badgers pootle about on the woodland floor below. Much of her adult energy was poured into rehabilitating wild animals. She nursed badgers back to health, gradually moving them from garage to artificial garden sett and then back into the wood. They ignited such passion that she wrote a book

about them. It was called *Through the Badger Gate* and it read like a love letter to Bodger, her first badger. By the time I was born, Grandma's badgers were back in the wild, or dead, and the cages in her garden were full of injured tawny and barn owls instead. As a child, I was not aware that my grandma had played a crucial role in changing the relationship between humans and badgers in Britain, perhaps for good.

Unlike my childhood, bereft of all but fictional badgers, every evening was badger night for the residents of Wookey Hole. Nick and Sue's daughter, Jess, remembered what passed for entertainment in these parts during her teenage years. One day a young man stuffed a firework inside a dead badger's head and they all stood back and watched the explosion. 'Everyone hates running over badgers ...' Jess explained. I nodded empathically, pondering the heartbreak of accidentally flattening a badger. '... Because it fucks up your car.'

This was the first jolt upon entering Badgerland. Watching badgers in the wild, I hoped, would be a step towards understanding these unique animals, and our complex, contrary relationship with them. In recent years, however, the land where badgers roamed had become a battleground on which collided all kinds of arguments about the disjuncture between the town and the country, the crisis in farming, the rights of animals and how we should best live alongside wild creatures in our countryside. What I had not yet realised was the compelling wild power of the animals I would eventually discover in the many different Badgerlands. I was also completely unprepared for

the passion of the people who set up home in this dusky underworld, bearing both ancient enmities and a more contemporary sentimentality towards badgers.

I hoped to trace the strange history of our relationship with badgers and find out why it was so vexed; why some people devoted their lives to feeding badgers while others risked prison to torture them; and why what was styled as a cultural war between the countryside and the city was being waged through the badger, a ferocious debate over the animal's contribution to bovine TB in cattle and whether that merited a cull of badgers.

We divide most wild animals in Britain into pests or national treasures. A few, such as the fox, are both. There is clarity in the human relationship with the fox; we either despise or admire it, usually for the same reason: that it is a cunning, adaptable predator. Our relationship with the badger is far less cogent, and much more mysterious. For all the love lavished on badgers since Kenneth Grahame made Mr Badger the paternal rock upon whom less reliable species could depend, there is an older tradition of massacring these mammals. The badger may be popularly seen as a noble, quintessentially British beast in its tenacity, determination and defence of its fortress-like home, and yet it has endured centuries of persecution probably more brutal than has been meted out to the fox. Unlike the fox, we don't quite know what to make of the badger. Is she stupid or intelligent? Predator or prey? Tame pet or wild thing? Fearsome or fearful? Good or evil?

*

I tiptoed silently across the field, away from our jolly conversation inside the warm farm kitchen, obeying the first law of badger watching: keep downwind of the sett. I was woefully equipped for the night, and not just because I'd borrowed a torch that threw out the yellowy light of a guttering candle. It was my first night out alone in the dark, the proper pitch black that could only be delivered by the countryside, for years. I had little knowledge of the night, and less experience of it. Like most adults, I banished darkness; my life was constantly lit up, as if I was afraid of something. Without being regularly tested, our senses become even dimmer. Now, lacking the comfort of clear sight, my usually underemployed ears and nostrils strained. In the chill at the end of a long winter, there was no smell. What could I hear? Only the wind.

Moving as stealthily as I could, I laboriously approached the sett where paddock met copse above a small stream. The trickle of water was lost in the breeze that mussed the branches. I stopped in the shadow of a mature oak. Two twigs cracked under foot, as loudly as a gun. Even in the dark, the enormous spoil heaps of lumpy clay clawed aside by the badgers showed up deep maroon. Their earthworks resembled a tumbledown medieval fort, in miniature. All around were shallow pits, latrines, neatly filled with pyramids of badger poo.

The wind whipped tears from my eyes and they rolled down my cheeks as I stood there silently, torch flicked off, watching blackness. If I had been suddenly illuminated by someone else's torch I would have looked like a disconsolate toddler. I had not gone roaming alone in the countryside at night since I was small, and childhood sensations

suddenly washed over me. I had missed out on badgers as a boy and now, as an adult, reluctantly working in London, I missed out on spending time in the country. Searching for badgers, and the world they inhabited, was also my own idiosyncratic attempt to escape the strictures of suburbia and rediscover a state of being where I could be absorbed by the rush of the wind and the sway of the trees and the scent of the earth.

The thick round copse on the brow of the hill to the south-east was just as I had imagined the wood in *Danny, the Champion of the World*, the sort of place where poachers go in search of pheasants. Although I felt a genuine frisson of fear, an alertness that comes from thwarted senses, it was a small revelation to me that I was no longer afraid of the dark. Some kind of toughening up, or disenchantment, had taken place since I read Roald Dahl's story as a boy. With badgers on my mind, I actually identified not with Danny but with the gamekeeper, the shadowy figure standing stock still in the lee of a thick tree trunk. The watcher, not the watched.

A dead branch reached down to brush my shoulder like a hand. I jumped. The wind met the bare branches, and together they roared like waves, blotting out all else for twenty seconds. Then the wind subsided for a minute, before it raced through the trees again. A tawny owl called, a low note, in the distance. Another one, higher-pitched, answered. On the nearest rise, a field away, a cluster of trees rubbed their branches together with a squeak that sounded like a sudden twist of the dial when you tune an old-fashioned radio. Then it became more exotic, a flamboyant scrape that could have been the

complaint of a tropical bird. I was satisfied with my own silence until the wind dropped. Suddenly, everything about me was audible, and I felt completely exposed. My jacket rustled, my stomach gurgled and my right knee joint creaked. A bad-tempered sheep sounded as if it was single-handedly rounding up its flock, marshalling them against the menace of the night. The stream reverberated in stereo. Distant cars swept by on the A39 to Bath. A barking dog, a mile beyond.

In this cacophony, nothing rose up from the earth. No black-and-white striped masks staring hard at me, no trundling humping blundering grunting silhouettes; no sniffs of the air, no snorts, barks or groans; no musky smells. No badgers. My thudding boots and human stench probably scared them off. Or perhaps it was too cold, and the badger babies were too tiny and mewling to leave alone in the fug of the sett without a warm, lightly furred belly curled protectively around them.

Feeling thwarted but oddly enlivened by standing alone at night in a random field, I wandered to the crest of the nearest hill, where a few trees clung. There was a flash close by, and something pale rushed against my vision. An owl. A security light by a cottage on the eastern horizon flashed on and off, as if it were Morse code, and then it was snuffed out, quickly, by a shadow passing across it. This spooked me. For a second, I saw a man running, in the dark across the field. Then I realised it was a mist, tumbling down the valley but travelling with purpose, as if it were a wraith. My imagination was taking over, filling in the blanks of the night.

I stuck closely to the shadow of the hedges, still vaguely hoping to

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chance upon a badger on its nightly rounds. Nothing was abroad. The grass was wet, the earth cold, and I now understood what chilled-to-the-bone felt like. I sought out the light of the farmhouse like a moth and, once inside, it took a few minutes in the warm before my fingers began tingling hot–cold, deliciously, as the cat Moz (‘Mask of Zorro’) curled in a perfect comma on the floor beside the wood-burning stove. It was going to be harder to find the inhabitants of Badgerlands than I first thought.