

How to find Ireland's amazing wildlife



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Some useful tips for finding badgers, foxes, bats, hedgehogs, eagles and woodpeckers in Ireland!

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How to find badgers



Seeing a live badger is actually much easier than you might think. You just have to find an active sett, and then organise a night to watch the badgers without disturbing them.

- The main clue to finding badgers is, of course, **the entrance to their setts**. These are wider than tall, about 20cm in diameter, have a downward-facing flat side and smooth walls on the inside. There may be more than one entrance to the sett, so have a look around the area. If the sett is in use, look for a **large heap of freshly-dug soil** and perhaps **clumps of dry grass** used by the badgers as bedding.
- Look for well-worn, 20cm-wide **paths of trodden vegetation** that may be regularly used by badgers. If you find the so-called 'badgerway', think about **which direction to take** that will lead you to the sett.
- If you want to know that the trail was created by badgers, you might follow the trail until you come across a **barbed-wire fence** that the badger had crossed under. The barbs of the fence may trap a **tuft or two of the badger's fur**, which is unmistakably long and black and white.
- The badger's **pawprints** can most easily be seen on a muddy or snowy surface. A print is wider than long, like the entrance to a sett, and has **four or five toes with long clawmarks**. However, you should remember that a badger's hind foot often steps into where its fore foot has stepped, thus smudging the prints.
- The badger's **dung** varies in shape and size depending on what the animal has eaten. If it has been eating worms, the droppings may be soft and twisted, whereas if berries have been eaten, they may be a bluish, jelly-like structure.
- The faeces are often deposited in a **special 'latrine'**, situated **close to the sett**. These are small, conical depressions no more than 20cm deep, and they must NOT be covered in leaves, as the musky scent of the droppings is important for communication in badgers.
- Have a look near the sett for an **elder or dead tree**. Check the bottom metre of the tree for **long claw marks**, as badgers use these trees as a scratching post, possibly to mark their territory.
- Search the ground for small **snuffle holes**, where the soil has been upturned by the badgers' dextrous snouts in the search for earthworms and insects. These are easiest to find in **more open areas**, such as a clearing or a golf course.
- You can talk to people in your local area if they have a badger sett on their property, or you can join a badger group (if you have one nearby) who are involved in watching badgers.
- Why not look into investing in **night monoculars or night scopes** if you are considering regular visits to a sett at night? These can help you see better in the dark when watching badgers. You

can also use a torch, although, to avoid alerting the animals, you may **couple your torch with a red filter** or even simply a **piece of red plastic**.

Badger-watching tips













- If you really want to observe badgers without disturbing them, you should **understand how the animals' senses work**, as well as **learn their nightly routine**.
- Check **which direction the wind is blowing in** before your encounter; if the wind is **blowing in your face**, the badgers are unlikely to catch your scent. Taking a shower beforehand and wearing freshly-cleaned clothes will also help to rid you of any strong scents.
- Find somewhere as far away from the sett as possible (**at least 10-20 metres**), but close enough to be able to see activity. Find **somewhere comfortable to sit**, you could use a cushion to help you. Also, **don't forget to go toilet** before you head out!
- Wear **dark clothes** to conceal yourself against the blackness of the night. To avoid the badgers detecting pale skin, wear **dark gloves** and **cover your face with a scarf/balaclava**. Sitting down by a bush or tree in the darkness can also help to **break up your outline** so that the badgers can't make out your shape.
- To avoid the badgers hearing you, wear clothes that **do not rustle**, such as a fleece. Try and **avoid coughing or sneezing**; if you need to, do it into your sleeve as quietly as you can.
- Going on a **night when it has rained** would be ideal, as the softer, wet ground makes it easier for the badgers to dig for worms. Don't forget to take **wet gear**!
- **The animals don't like it when it's really cold**, so best go on a night when it's not too breezy.
- Try to be at the sett **at least an hour before dusk**, when the badgers are likely to start peeping out from the sett entrance.
- You may come back to visit the sett **several nights in a row**. Don't forget to take pictures at the end of your observation time.
- As a final tip, **ask the landowner** if they are happy to give you permission to observe the badgers on their property.



From left to right: The entrance to a badger sett (with another entrance visible to the left of the photo), with clumps of discarded bedding; Badger latrine, showing faeces; Badger pawprint in mud, showing digits and clawmarks.

The badger Year

This table is based on a poster in the Wicklow Mountains National Park information office in Glendalough, Co. Wicklow. It shows what badgers get up to on each of the twelve months of the year, so this can come in very useful when you want to see a live badger.

<p>January – Although activity may still be limited, badgers are not deterred by snow.</p>	<p>February – Most cubs are born and the peak time for long-duration matings and territorial marking.</p>	<p>March – Bedding collection reaches a peak while signs of territorial marking are obvious.</p>
		
<p>April – Emergence before full darkness and cubs come above ground for the first time.</p>	<p>May – The second peak for long duration matings. Cubs begin to explore with more courage.</p>	<p>June – Most cubs weaned and foraging with sow. Emergence can be very early especially for more independent cubs.</p>
		
<p>July – Cubs play less often and badgers will go off to feed soon after emergence if the weather is dry.</p>	<p>August – Drought can make this the worst time of year for badgers, particularly cubs. Cereals and wasps' nests are often taken now.</p>	<p>September – Sows come into oestrus a second time and further matings occur. A peak time for digging with frequent bedding collection.</p>
		
<p>October – Fruit and nuts now included in badger diets and they put on weight rapidly.</p>	<p>November – Emergence is later and food can be harder to find. Badgers begin to rely on their fat reserves.</p>	<p>December – Badgers sleep longer and more deeply, emerging less frequently. Blastocysts implanted in mated females.</p>
		

How to find foxes



Foxes are more abundant in urban areas than in the countryside, so it is always thrilling to see a fox in a natural setting.

- **One of the best tools** for finding foxes **may be your nose**: sniff the air in a particular spot where the fox might have sprayed its **strong, herby scent**. Once you've smelled the fox's perfume, you will never forget it. Thus, it is worth looking around for other foxy clues.
- Fox prints frequently occur in a **long straight line** and follow a regularly used trail, such as beside a hedge. The **4-6cm long tracks** show **four roughly round toes and a roughly triangular pad**, with a claw mark visible in front of each toe. They are narrower than those of a domestic dog's, which are wider and more splayed out and vary in size depending on the breed. Fresh snow and mud are good substrates for finding fox tracks.
- A fox's scats can be found on a **prominent landmark** such as a rock, used by the fox as a territorial marker. The scats are usually about **2cm wide and 3-9cm in length**, tapered at one end, with a musky odour less offensive than those of a dog. Looking closely may reveal what the fox had eaten, such as the remains of berries or small mammals.
- If you find a dead bird and the **primary wing feathers have been cut through the base**, then it is almost certainly the work of a fox. A bird killed by a raptor (e.g. a sparrowhawk) would have its primary feathers plucked out individually.
- Good places to look for foxes include **rabbit warrens** (where a fox might visit frequently in the hope of catching an unlucky rabbit), **cattle pastures** (where the trodden ground and cowpats attract earthworms, which in turn attract foxes), and **areas with long grass** that might hide small rodents. Don't forget to look out for the aforementioned fox clues!
- Around **January**, listen out for the **vixen's mating call**: a loud, haunting sound like a woman screaming. During this month, road-killed foxes are a common sight, but the corpse indicates that there could be more foxes nearby.
- The heyday of any foxwatcher has to be during **Late April/early May**, when the cubs first emerge from the earth. If you find an active earth, look for a concealed spot, downwind and as far away as possible, and you can enjoy watching the cubs playing, but be aware that the parents will be coming and going with food, and will move the cubs away if they know there are people around. **Food scraps, flattened vegetation and buzzing insects** are signs that the cubs have emerged.
- Why not ask people in your local area if they see foxes regularly? Or maybe visit a nature reserve and ask the warden and volunteers if there are areas where foxes are frequently seen?

- Foxes are more common in **our towns and cities**, where they are more likely to be spotted than their rural counterparts. A fox could even potentially show up in **your own back garden**, or on the grounds of your apartment, depending on where you live. You can also look for foxes in **disused building sites, cemeteries, landfill sites, and even along railway lines**, as foxes are known to make a living in these places.



From left to right: Drawing comparing the footprint of a domestic dog (1) with that of a red fox (2); The entrance of a fox burrow; Fox faeces, showing the remains of what the animal has eaten.

How to find bats



The species pictured here is Leisler's bat, the largest of our 10 native bat species.

- The best time to see bats foraging is at dusk and dawn, which is also a good time to find their roosting site. A good way of identifying a roost is seeing if the bats congregate for a last fly-around before they disappear at the crack of dawn. Remember not to enter or shine a torch on the roost to avoid disturbing the bats!
- Bats feed when insects are active on warm, dry evenings, so don't bother going out when the weather is cold, rainy or windy. A pond or lake is a good place to look for foraging bats, and using a torch will generally not disturb the animals as they feed.
- In the summer months when bats are active, you can join an organised walk with an expert to look for bats in the evening.
- If you're interested, you could look into getting your own bat detector. This will help you connect with bats by allowing you to hear what sounds the animals are making.
- If you think you have bats in your house, you could call friends and/or relatives to watch each side of the house for departing bats. To increase your chances of seeing any bats, lie on the ground outside and look up at the house, so that it looks more like a silhouette against the sky at dusk, and just pay attention. You can stay up late any night to watch the bats leaving their roost!

Identifying bats



Members of the family Vespertilionidae (pictured is a common pipistrelle, *Pipistrellus pipistrellus*) have a plain nose.



The lesser horseshoe bat (*Rhinolophus hipposideros*) has a much more distinctive nose.



Look at the tragus, the fleshy projection sticking out of the ear. If the tragus is long and pointy, it is one of the *Myotis* bats (*Natterer's bat*, *M. nattereri*, pictured).



If the tragus is short and blunt, it belongs to a pipistrelle bat (common pipistrelle pictured).



The brown long-eared bat's (*Plecotus auritus*) long ears can be nearly as long as the body and are joined at the base. In other bat species, the ears are separated by the forehead.



Nathusius's pipistrelle (*P. nathusii*) is the largest of our three pipistrelle species, and has lighter-tipped fur.



The soprano pipistrelle (*P. pygmaeus*) has a more pinkish-looking face than the more blackish face of the common species (see above). Also, its call reaches 55kHz as opposed to the common's 45kHz.



Daubenton's bat (*Myotis daubentonii*) has larger, hairier feet than other members of its genus.



Natterer's bat has a row of bristles along the edge of the tail membrane.

How to find hedgehogs



Hedgehogs are even harder to find than both badgers and foxes, so anyone who catches a sighting of a live one is extremely lucky!

- The best times of year to see hedgehogs are April-May, after they emerge from hibernation and are looking for a mate, and August-September, weeks before they retire for winter.

- It may be sad to see a dead hedgehog crushed on the side of a road, but where there is a corpse, **live animals are likely to be nearby.**

- Hedgehog faeces are often left in **open areas** and are **dark, wrinkled and dry**, about the length of your little finger, and usually **taper at one end.**

- A hedgehog's footprints are **best seen in muddy ground**, particularly after it has rained. The prints each have **four toes** (despite the animals themselves having five), the forefeet are wider than long and look similar to the hands of a human child.
- Look in suitable locations, such as a thicket or within a hedgerow, for a hedgehog's nest, which is a compact dome made from grass. Hedgehogs regularly make new nests in which to sleep, so there may be lots of these.
- To actually see live hedgehogs, **go out at dusk** and walk in suitable habitats, such as **the boundary of a woodland** or an **overgrown meadow**. Every so often, stop and listen for any signs of activity.
- If you have hedgehogs living nearby, or know someone who does, leave out **water and dried dog food** to entice them (bread and milk should NOT be used).
- The **messier your garden**, the more hedgehogs will like it! Decaying leaves attract slugs, which in turn attract hedgehogs. Logs and stone piles are also suitable for hogs. There will be more invertebrates of all kinds if chemicals are not used. An unkempt hedge provides shelter.
- You can also provide a **weather-proof hedgehog house** for shelter from the elements and as a resting place for the animals, especially during the hibernation period.



From left to right: Hedgehog faeces; Hedgehog pawprints clearly visible in mud; A hedgehog sleeping in its nest.

How to find eagles

- The two species of eagle in Ireland –the golden eagle in particular – often live in areas which are far from roads; walking a sufficient distance to see the birds makes the effort more rewarding.
- Carefully scan ridges; an eagle’s plumage makes it difficult to see against a hillside but its silhouette is easier to see against the empty sky. Methodically scan the hillside quickly every time you take a short break from walking.
- When scanning a ridge, check prominent perching spots such as a branch poking out from the cliff face, where an eagle will get maximum take-off lift from updrafts below.
- Listen out for the calls of crows such as ravens, as these will often try to mob an eagle in mid-air if they see one.
- It may be easy to confuse both eagles with a buzzard, which is much more abundant here. As the size of the bird can be hard to judge against the sky, look at the length and shape of the wings, head and tail. Look at the photos of both eagle species below to memorize the key features that set them apart from buzzards.
- Always make sure you bring binoculars – without them, it is usually difficult to find or identify an eagle. You could use a telescope for a perched eagle, if you do bring one.
- For hiking, wear suitable clothes and footwear for rough upland terrain, and always be conscious of the changing weather; go with a friend or, if alone, tell somebody where you plan to go.
- If you think you’ve found a possible eagle nest-site, keep at least 500m away so you don’t disturb the nest. At known eyries, obey warning signs such as steep cliffs or hillsides.
- It is easy to know where to see wild eagles in Ireland. Golden eagles are found only at Glenveagh national park in Donegal, while the white-tailed eagle can be seen at Killarney national park. Having become extinct in the wild in Ireland, both species were reintroduced into the respective parks.



On the left is a golden eagle, and to the right, a white-tailed eagle. Compare the two for differences.

How to find great spotted woodpeckers

- Walk and search in areas with old trees and dead wood, as these are a favourite haunt for woodpeckers.
- Woodpeckers are best seen in the early morning, when they leave their roost holes to look for grubs, and early evening, when they are often highly active before they disappear for the night.
- Avoid rustling leaves and stepping on twigs. Keep trees behind you to break up your outline. Avoid making eye contact with the woodpeckers most of the time so they don't think you're paying attention to them.
- You don't need to be fully camouflaged, but dark-coloured, rustle-free clothes will help you get closer to any bird you find.
- Woodpeckers are often heard before they are seen. Apart from their well-known drumming, listen out for a 'Kik' call which is made when under stress.
- Woodpeckers feed at every level of the forest. They like to cling to snags, which are short projections on trees, so always check these.
- Scour branches for small 'pits', made by a woodpecker rooting through the bark for grubs.
- Woodpeckers can be skittish and fly away at the first sign of humans, so be quiet. Cough or sneeze into your arm if you are about to do so.
- Woodpeckers often hide behind tree trunks when they sense someone is watching. Wait patiently and they usually hop back into view.
- Once you find a woodpecker, observe its behaviour. They are always doing things, so it is rewarding to watch them.
- Join a guided walk with an experienced birdwatcher who knows where there are woodpeckers and how they behave.



This is a male great spotted woodpecker, as he has a red nape, which is missing in females.

Bibliography

- *RSPB Spotlight: Foxes* by Mike Unwin
- *RSPB Spotlight: Badgers* by James Lowen
- *RSPB Spotlight: Eagles* by Mike Unwin
- *RSPB Spotlight: Hedgehogs* by James Lowen
- *RSPB Spotlight: Woodpeckers* by Gerard Gorman
- *RSPB Spotlight: Bats* by Nancy Jennings

Some useful websites

- discoverwildlife.com - from the team of BBC Wildlife magazine, this website is filled with fascinating articles with lots of useful information for finding animal clues, times of year to see wildlife, and how to get good photographs of certain species.
- birdwatchireland.ie - the website of BirdWatch Ireland, Ireland's largest independent conservation organisation. There are fact files about the different bird species found in Ireland, as well as the best places in the country where you can find them.
- batconservationireland.org - Bat Conservation Ireland is dedicated to promoting the conservation of the 10 species of bat that live in Ireland. This website contains fact files on each species, as well as information on the status and ecology of Irish bats.
- iwt.ie - the website for the Irish Wildlife Trust features a list of fact files for some of the many species of animals and plants found in Ireland. There are also details on some nature reserves owned by the trust, including Lough Boora reserve in Co. Offaly, as well as privately owned reserves.

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