

BADGER REHABILITATION

What do you do when you are presented with a helpless tiny creature about the size of your hand with eyes tightly shut, pink and white stripes on its head only a few days old.



This is the sort of situation faced by Pauline Kidner who runs a wildlife rescue centre in the South West of England - an area with a high density of badgers. The creature described above is one of many orphan badgers that Pauline and her staff are asked to deal with each year. They came into the centre for a variety of reasons, some are found when a sett is accidentally damaged, some are dragged out of the sett by an inquisitive dog, others have been abandoned by their parent - usually because they have something wrong with them, not always apparent to the carer upon initial examination. Older cubs from about 8 weeks of age may have simply got separated from their parent and become lost.



Badger cubs come into care as young as less than one week old. They are not difficult to rear but take up an enormous amount of time. Pauline and sometimes an animal carer who helps with the cubs, often have to feed the tiny cubs every hour and a half depending on their age and state of health, as the cubs come in for care from February through to May it means an endless round of putting food in one end and cleaning up what comes out of the other.

Badgers are highly social animals and need others of their own age to interact with, play with and compete with in order to ensure their necessary mental and physical development. **Secret World often deals with as many as 50 cubs each year.**



While in care the cubs have to undergo 3 blood tests in order to ensure that they are not carrying Bovine TB, a disease which badgers are alleged to pass on to cattle but is not yet proven. Trials are currently taking place in England and Wales by DEFRA to try to prove this link which is disputed by many people including the NFBG - National Federation of Badger Groups.

The intention of Secret World is to eventually return any reared cubs back into the wild. This in itself is a complex procedure and only takes place once each animal has had 3 clear blood test results so minimising the risk of it being infected.



The cubs, as they become old enough, are mixed with similar sized cubs into groups of between 5 & 7 ideally consisting of a higher proportion of sows to boars - this makes for a more stable group. They are given access to a securely fenced-grass enclosure with an artificial sett within it. They stay in this enclosure of several weeks, here they learn to grub for earthworms, which forms over 60% of their diet, play and bond as a group and become fit and also very importantly adapt to badger hours i.e. become nocturnal and develop a healthy respect for people, lose the tameness that was required for the successful bottle rearing.

The whole process from first receiving a cub as early as February to eventual release in July/August is a lengthy and very stressful time, especially on the part of the carers. The care and hard work that goes into

rearing these delightful, often infuriating animals is immense and throughout this whole process the worry of whether a release site will be found is ever present.

Because badgers are highly social and territorial animals the release is not simple, by the time the cubs are ready for release they will not be able to be returned to where they were found, if that is known, because they will be treated as aliens by the resident badgers, at best being driven off and at worst killed, this means that a release site for the entire site has to be found. This consists of suitable badger habitat, not occupied by badgers already. A survey is then carried out by people experienced with the ways of badgers to determine the local badger status, if the habitat is suitable but not occupied, enquiries are made as to why this is so - if persecution is suspected then the release site will not be used.



Once a site is found, the badgers are fitted with identichips and tattooed to enable them to be identified at a later date and provide data on the success of the release. All releases of any wild animals should be carefully monitored. At the site the group is placed in a temporary enclosure within which is an area suitable for them to make their own sett. They are kept in the enclosure for several weeks, fed and watered before the fence is removed and they are given their freedom.

The most crucial element to rearing these cubs is finding suitable release sites, some landowners are concerned at the possibility of disease i.e. TB, although all possible precautions are taken to ensure these animals are TB free. The whole process is carried out under consultation with Veterinary Surgeons, DEFRA and the RSPCA. If we don't find release sites for these cubs then, through no fault of their own, they won't get their second chance