

Zoologists tap into GPS to track badger movements

March 31 2015, by Thomas Deane

Zoologists from Trinity College Dublin's School of Natural Sciences are using GPS tracking technology to keep a 'Big Brother' eye on badgers in County Wicklow. By better understanding the badgers' movements and the reasons behind them, the zoologists hope to devise a highly effective TB vaccination programme.

Badgers carry TB, and can transmit the disease to other wildlife as well as cattle. When this occurs, cattle must be put down, which creates a big problem for farmers. Badger culls have been used to try to stop the spread of TB, but many people desire a less drastic solution.

One barrier is the lack of knowledge as to how TB is actually transmitted. This is something the Trinity zoologists are tackling with their GPS approach – by compiling detailed information on how often [badgers](#) enter farmyards, to what extent they avoid fields when cattle are grazing in them, and how far they roam each night, the team hopes to assess how quickly the disease might be able to spread.

PhD Researcher in Zoology, Aoibheann Gaughran, said: "All of this information should help us to work out the best way to get a vaccine against TB into all the badgers in each social group. We've put collars carrying satellite tracking devices on more than 40 badgers, which automatically send us a text, pinpointing their location at least four times during the night. The study has been running for four years now and we have built up one of the largest data sets of badger movements ever collected."

The zoologists have teamed up with researchers from the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine (DAFM) and the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) in this project. Their efforts will be showcased on RTÉ One's 'Living The Wildlife' at 7:00 pm on Tuesday, March 31.

Associate Professor in Zoology at Trinity, Dr Nicola Marples, is closely involved in the ongoing work.

She said: "Ideally we would like to be able to transfer a vaccine in food but that is harder than it sounds, given that dominant male badgers would be likely to eat the lot if it was placed indiscriminately. The data we have will hopefully let us devise a plan to achieve maximum coverage in our badgers."

About badgers

Badgers are a very common mammal in Ireland but few of us have actually seen one in the wild. That's because they are nocturnal, mostly coming out of their setts only at night to forage, patrol their territories, and meet the opposite sex.

Sometimes you can see them in the evening during the short summer nights, but they are shy and quick to pick up the scent or sound of humans, so you have to be lucky.

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

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