

## Badgers and Wasps

The last mention of a badger in these columns was in November 1998. Not that they've been absent locally but I'm not usually around to see them. Indeed, there are more badger carcasses now by the roadside than I ever remember. Apparently they like maize and are doing very well nationally as a result. Sadly, they also like hedgehogs and their recent increase may be one of the factors contributing to the hedgehogs' dramatic decline. I've never yet found a hedgehog skin emptied of its meat and 'laid flattened on its back' but we did find a substantial hole in the Abbey lawn made by a badger in a successful attempt to dig out a wasp's nest.

When first found there was still a large number of wasps present despite the nest being reduced to a shell. They were seemingly still attempting to rebuild it or to find and minister to any remaining grubs – still, that is, following their instincts though it looked a hopeless case. Both workers and adult males were crawling over the debris, and there was also what looked like a wasp mimic, paler than a wasp and less distinctly marked, and perhaps a parasite on the grubs- relying on its near resemblance to get into the nest and lay its eggs, but that's only a guess.

The wasps were of the common variety as far as I could tell: *Vespa vulgaris*, and all will perish as winter sets in apart from the queens. – one of which found its way into a file in my room, no doubt hoping to remain until Spring. The books tell me that wasp nests are a favourite food of badgers in late summer and autumn. There's no honey to be had but plenty of grubs and there were lots of empty combs scattered about as evidence.

Apparently the badger digs down rapidly to any underground nest heedless of the wasps and protected by its very dense fur. They will also attack bees' nests for both grubs and honey, and on one occasion a badger was seen to make a very sudden and rapid exit, so perhaps the odd sting gets through after all. Our nest was first noted on 12th October and even after frost and rain wasps were still visiting its remains until at least 22nd. After two more sharp frosts there were none, however, on 4th November.

A badger has also been sighted in the garden recently in late evening, perhaps attracted by the many fallen apples and putting the fear of God into our neighbour's cat. They are omnivorous, after all, and have a taste for everything from mice and voles to rats and rabbits as well as a variety of insect food, worms, amphibians, birds and vegetable matter. Whether they suck milk from cows, as hedgehogs have also been reputed to do, is debatable but the more one studies nature the more one realises that almost anything is possible. Or to quote Annie Dillard,

*'There is no one standing over evolution with a blue pencil to say 'Now that one there is absolutely ridiculous, and I won't have it.' If a creature makes it, it gets a 'stet'. .....of the variety of form itself, of the multiplicity of forms, I know nothing. Except that,*

*apparently, anything goes. This holds for forms of behaviour as well as design – the mantis munching her mate, the frog wintering in mud, the spider wrapping a hummingbird, the pine processionary straddling a thread. Welcome aboard. A generous spirit signs on this motley crew.*  
*(Pilgrim at Tinker Creek)*

Br. John