

Badger baiters find killing fields of Scotland fair game

David Taylor

GANGS of badger-baiters from England, frustrated by heightened surveillance south of the border, are crossing into Scotland to pursue their barbaric sport.

Police are investigating the deaths of six badgers found shot or snared since January within a 20-mile radius of Dumfries. Evidence of illegal digging has been found at protected setts near the border in south-west Scotland, where police believe at least one badger was taken.

Police and conservationists have received information about groups travelling from Cumbria and Lancashire in search of badgers. Sgt Graham Young, wildlife liaison officer for Dumfries and Galloway, says at least one English group with dog-fighting links has targeted Scotland because surveillance of badgers has thwarted their activities in England and Wales.

There are believed to be 250,000 adult badgers and 45,000 sets in Britain. Jerry Brookes, chairman of the National Federation of Badger Groups, estimates 9,000 to 10,000 badgers die each year as a result of baiting.

The diggers, who operate with teams of terriers often equipped with electronic locaters, can earn more than £1,000 for each live badger they snare

and sell on to baiters. If the diggers are also involved in baiting, the badger may be killed soon after it has been dug out of the sett and pulled to the surface using large metal tongs or a wire noose.

Police and wildlife groups have described reports of men weakening the badgers by stabbing or shooting them before turning dogs on them in the open countryside. Sgt Young said police have also received information about badgers being removed alive and taken to specially constructed pits.

'They are put into concrete pits to fight with dogs,' he said. 'A fully-grown badger is more than a match for any single dog, but they are usually faced with two dogs, and fresh dogs are put in all the time. It is an horrific prospect and the outcome is always death for the badger.'

Sgt Young said: 'All of the diggers are looking for new patches. Dumfries and Galloway is an unspoilt land for them and it's the first they come to over the English border. My intention is to nip this in the bud very quickly.'

He is encouraging landowners and people living in rural areas to be vigilant and report suspicious vehicles or people seen near badger setts, and has welcomed the establishment of the region's first badger protection group, under licence from Scottish Natural Heritage.