

By Anna Levin  
Photos Laurie Campbell

For over 45 years  
photographer Laurie  
Campbell has used  
fieldcraft to observe a  
range of badger habitats,  
including his own home!

ON SCREEN  
**THE ONE  
SHOW**  
SEE MORE OF  
LAURIE'S BADGERS  
one

# Badgers

about  
the  
house



Laurie looks at badger photos on his computer as a badger arrives at the glass door to his office. The wildlife photographer has patiently gained the trust of these omnivores.



**Watching badgers meant watching the night. Darkness can be a gift to a naturalist.**

**Above: muddy-nosed badgers appear at the entrance of a woodland sett in the springtime, surrounded by flowering wild garlic.**

**W**e're taking a shortcut through darkening woods to the still-shining river, wading down through wild garlic, which scents the evening air. Being out and about with wildlife

photographer Laurie Campbell involves taking the road less travelled. He doesn't rush from A to B: you'd miss too much along the way. He stops suddenly to pick up a badger hair – it's coarse, with a black band and white tip – and crouches to study the prints in the soft mud. There's a wide pad and a straight row of five forward-facing toes... definitely badger.

Laurie has known and watched badgers here since childhood. It feels like he can sense their presence, he's so alert to signs that most of us would stride past. As a schoolboy he would set out alone from his home in Berwick-upon-Tweed, following the river for miles, exploring and observing. One evening he discovered a badger sett on a wooded slope above the river and was drawn to a sense of the wild so close to home.

Here were large, wild mammals going about their bustling lives, yet hidden from most of the people around who wouldn't have walked so far, nor waited so long to see them.

Already a keen photographer, Laurie decided to watch the sett intensively and find ways to document what he observed. And so a lifelong adventure in badger watching began.

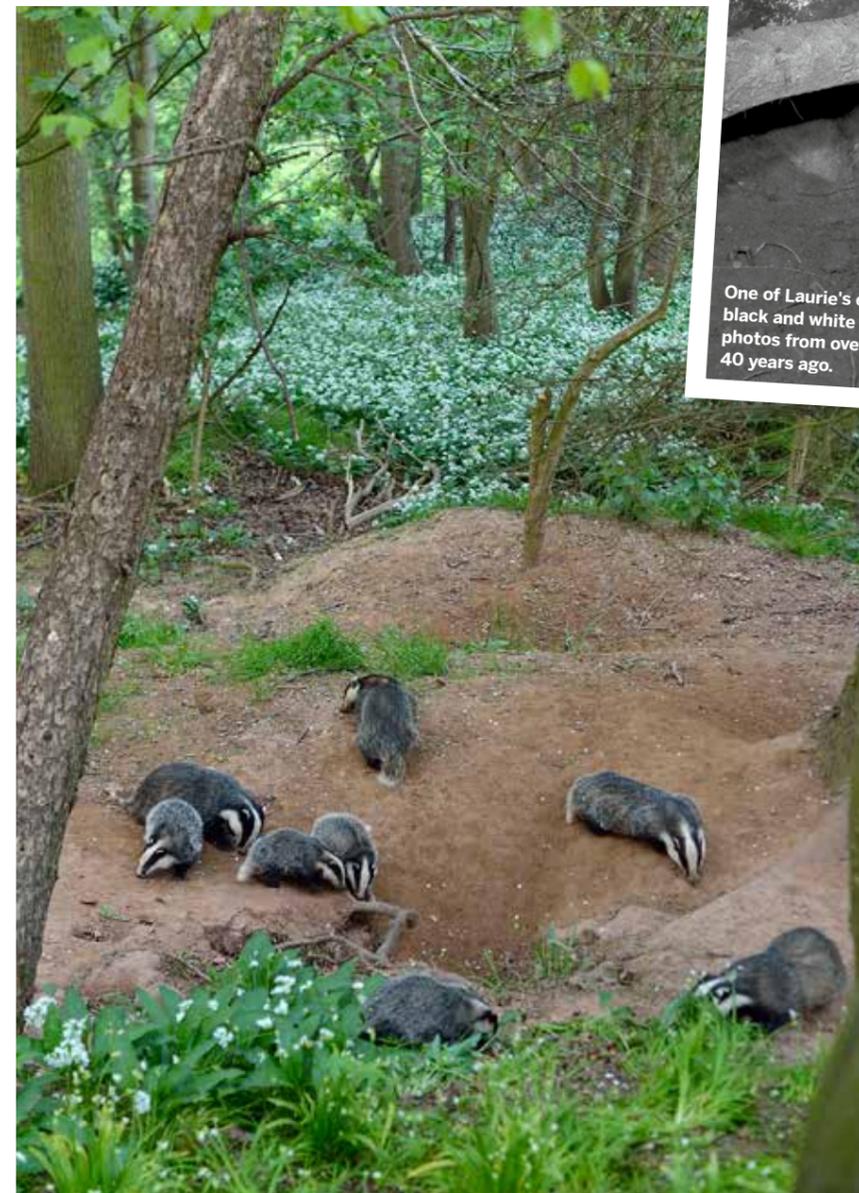
The first step was to get above them – a tip he had gleaned from studying David Stephen's seminal *A Guide to Watching Wild Life*, published in the 1960s. "It was like a Bible for me," says Laurie. He would arrive before sunset and lie silently along a branch of a large elm, later building and waterproofing a small hide in the tree. "A real adventure den up a tree!" recalls Laurie. "It was exciting to be on my own in places I'd never been with my family – in the wild."

Watching badgers meant watching the night and learning to be alone in the darkness. Laurie soon discovered that darkness brings an innate edginess that can be a gift to a

naturalist, acutely sharpening the senses and rendering the watcher alert and aware. He saw that human footpaths belonged to foxes and roe deer in the night, and found long-eared owls overwintering in a blackthorn thicket. One night he was startled to hear loud sighs close by – it turned out to be grey seals, coming far up the Tweed in search of salmon, their breath carrying on the still night air.

**Trial and error**

From his elm tree perch, Laurie learnt how to watch, photograph and understand badgers, by trial and error and keen observation. Once he accidentally left his camera bag on the path before he climbed the tree an hour before sunset. When a badger came along, snuffled it and shot off into the undergrowth, he realised how acute a badger's sense of



**Left: Laurie learnt early on – from David Stephen's *A Guide to Watching Wild Life* – that the best way to observe and photograph a badger sett is by looking down on it.**

**Above: when starting out as a photographer in the early 1970s, Laurie built his own badger-watching hide high in an elm tree overlooking the sett.**

**One of Laurie's early black and white photos from over 40 years ago.**

smell is. He noticed how they were edgier, and so harder to photograph, on windy nights when their sense of smell and hearing would be less reliable, and on bright, moonlit nights when they felt more vulnerable.

When the creation of the Berwick-upon-Tweed bypass threatened to slice through the woods of his badger beat, Laurie took a day off school and teamed up with a local naturalist to meet with the building contractors. "We must have seemed an odd pair – a school boy and an octogenarian," says Laurie. "But we got the underpass we asked for – a basic tunnel beneath the A1 to allow the badgers to continue on their foraging route."

Laurie went on to become one of Scotland's first full-time professional natural-history photographers, and badgers have been a constant focus of his work, and of evening

explorations, ever since. As a writer, I've been collaborating with Laurie for some years now and badgers always seem to crop up in the story, whatever else we're working on.

**Dedicated approach**

Once we met at Edinburgh Zoo, where Laurie had worked as a keeper when he left school. He led me straight past the penguins to the top of Corstorphine Hill, where an extensive badger sett sprawls beneath beech trees, the red earth compacted and smoothed around the wide entrances. When working here, Laurie had rigged up a hide on stilts 6m above this sett, often sleeping in his workplace to be ready to photograph the badgers after sunset.

Then at Aigas Field Centre in the Highlands, where Laurie has taught photography for more than a decade, we were waiting in a

hide at midnight hoping to glimpse a pine marten when a white stripe appeared in the dark woods. A badger came trundling along, snuffling around the peanuts that Laurie had scattered earlier. I held my breath to keep silent while it scoffed them with a loud noise.

Even on the wild cliffs at St Abbs, a dramatic spot between Edinburgh and Berwick-upon-Tweed that is famed for its seabird colonies, Laurie pointed out a large pit of turned soil and ripped turf within an area of herb-rich grassland. "It looked rotavated," he remembers now. "You could have seen from space that badgers had been at it!" They had been digging for a badger delicacy: pignuts. These nutty tubers are formed by a small wildflower of the same name in the umbellifer family.

Laurie has spent his working life 'commuting' through Scotland between his

**When Laurie was scent-marked by a badger, he considered it one of the highest accolades of his career.**

Clockwise from right: a badger emerges from its sett after darkness; a close-up of badger fur; claw markings on a fallen tree are a tell-tale sign that a badger sett is

situated nearby; an evening visitor to Laurie's garden consumes sunflower seeds from a bird table. This badger is accustomed to the house lights.



### Laurie's top badger watching tips

#### CHOOSE A LOCATION

As badgers and their setts are protected by law from disturbance, keep a distance of about 30m from the main burrow entrances to watch or photograph them. Recce the site in the daytime, when the badgers are underground, to plan your viewpoints. Make sure that it is not on private land and there is public access.

#### GET YOUR TIMING RIGHT

An existing natural feature can help to disguise your outline; for example, you could sit at the base of a tree or against a bank. Arrive at least an hour before sunset, and note the wind direction – badgers have an acute sense of smell and human scent may prevent them from venturing above ground.

#### JOIN A GROUP

Alternatively, join a guided watch through your local Badger Trust or Wildlife Trust group, or book a space in a hide. Dedicated badger-watching hides can be found at a growing number of reserves and in the grounds of enterprising farms, hotels and B&Bs. The animals will be habituated to people, so sightings happen more often and you're far less likely to cause them any disturbance.

Berwickshire home and the Highlands and Islands, holding to a mantra of "looking closer not travelling further" and reaping the rewards of an intimate knowledge of his home patch. Close by his village he watched over the years a badger sett that grew and morphed and developed as generations of badgers dug and shaped the landscape with their slopes and tunnels, paths and spoil heaps.

Laurie made just one exception to his close-to-home rule. In 1994, he spent two months in the Patagonian Andes with wildlife film-maker Hugh Miles in search of pumas. Hugh had already devoted many months to getting a female puma used to his presence. When Laurie arrived, he had to spend six weeks sitting for hours each day until she accepted him. It was a masterclass in habituating wild animals.

"It was like being let into a big secret," Laurie says. "There was no other way. We experimented with

hides, but this cat wasn't fooled for a second. For us to follow and photograph her safely, she had to know we were there and be happy with our presence at a respectful distance."

Back home in Berwickshire, Laurie was commissioned to illustrate a book on badgers, and decided to follow one family over a year, and to put into practice the concepts he had learnt in Chile. He dedicated time to silently watching and waiting, some distance from the large, rambling sett, leaning against a big old larch tree: "a dry seat and a backrest".

#### Gaining acceptance

Laurie came to recognise individuals among the clan, and in time he gained their trust and they accepted his quiet presence. When he was scent-marked by a badger one night, he considered it one of the highest accolades of his career: badgers usually only do that to other badgers so that the group shares a common scent. He was accepted.

Five cubs were born that year and they had never known the woods without Laurie's

presence. They came closer until one was lying in his lap snuffling peanuts from his hand while he took macro photographs of its fur. He watched them grow and develop and came to recognise their individual characters.

"As they put on layers of fat, the youngsters looked more like adults and it became harder to tell them apart," Laurie says. "But I could still identify them by their natures. The one that had been the smallest was snappier – you had to watch your fingers if giving titbits. A larger one was the gentlest. I made sure that the badgers never became dependent on my food. It was always just little treats to tempt them and to help form a bond."

When Laurie's young son told a teacher that he'd been sitting in a tent at the weekend feeding honey sandwiches to five young badgers, he was told off for making it up. But it was true. Badgers had become part of family life. The peanuts and pig food used to tempt them were part of the Campbell shopping list.

When the family moved to their current home 21 years ago, they soon noticed signs

of badgers visiting the garden: claw marks on the bird feeders that were filled with sunflower seeds; scuffles at night. Keen to photograph another aspect of badgers' lives, Laurie encouraged their presence in the garden, leaving food scraps out in a dish with a rock on top that they could nudge off.

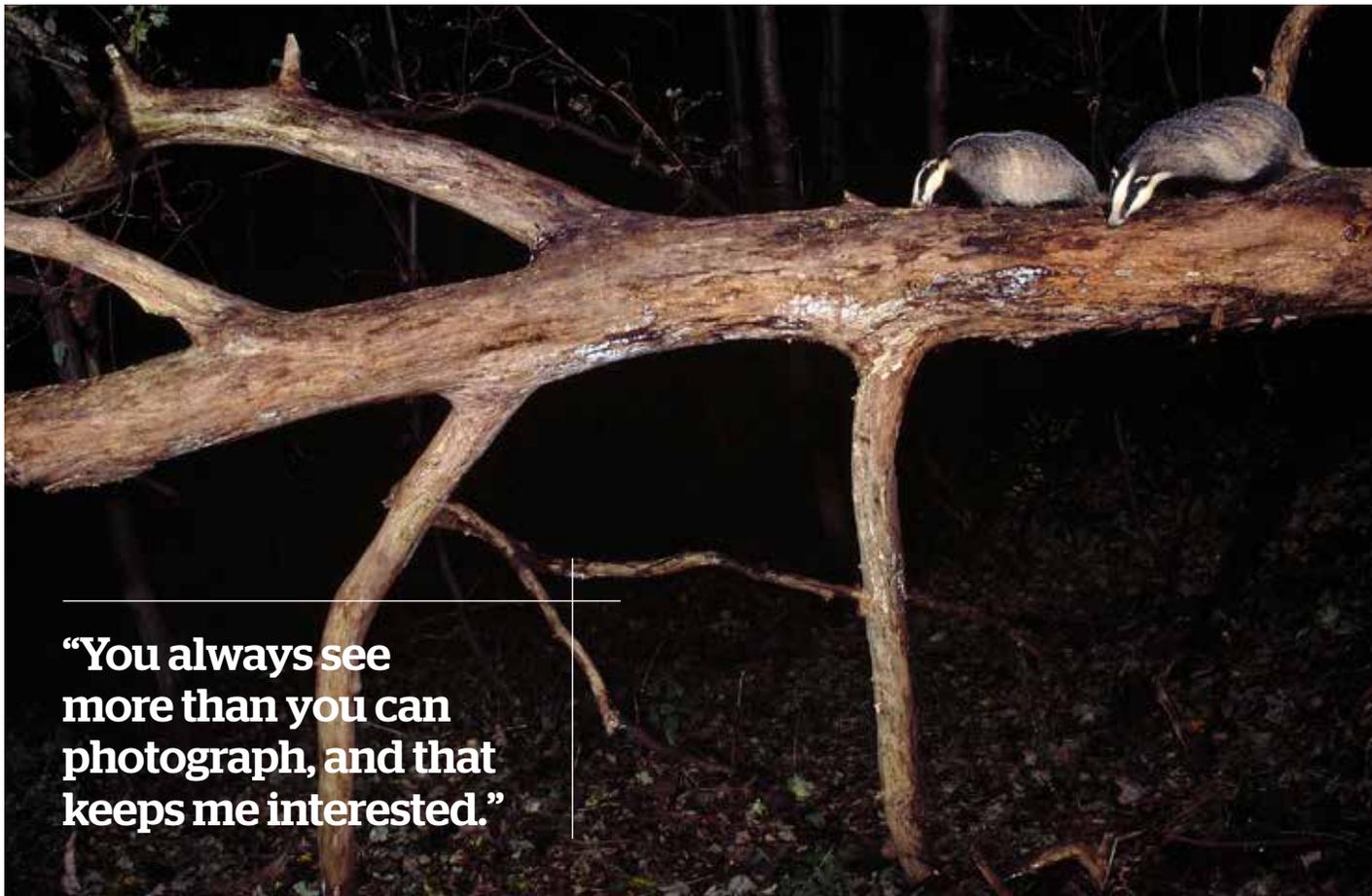
Some of these nocturnal visitors could be identified by their distinctive markings left from territorial fights with other badgers. "It was a bit like doing photo-identification of the Moray Firth's bottlenose dolphins from their scars," says Laurie, referring to another of his favourite photographic subjects. Over time he has lured the badgers closer, leaving the lights on in his home and then the windows open until they're accustomed to the activities of the human residents and sounds of the camera.

For much of his life, Laurie's night-watching delighted the naturalist in him but frustrated the photographer, so many of his early experiences were impossible to capture in such marginal lighting without using flash. Now advances in digital technology, such



Family friend: Laurie's son hand-feeds a young badger.





**“You always see more than you can photograph, and that keeps me interested.”**



**Top:** Laurie had noticed badgers shuffling along a dead tree “hoovering up” slugs and various insects and so he lay in wait to capture this behaviour.

**Above:** after badgers had been coming to his garden for years, Laurie left the door open, habituating the animals to the scents and ambient sounds of his house.

as far more sensitive sensors, have brought new possibilities. Reinvigorated by technical capability at last catching up with his fieldcraft, Laurie is exploring anew the world he has always known: the natural history of the night.

This means returning to badgers, photographing behaviour he has previously witnessed but not captured, as well as other denizens of the darkness such as bats, foxes, owls and invertebrates. He is also exploring the wider context of the night-time world – its landscape and skylscapes, and has a growing interest in astrophotography.

**Photography wish-list**

Laurie keeps a ‘wish list’ in his mind’s eye, which frustrates and motivates him in equal measure. “I’ve been photographing badgers for over 40 years,” he says. “But you always see more than you can photograph, and that keeps me interested. When I saw evidence of badgers taking salmon out of a stream, I got a new energy. That’s a photograph I haven’t seen yet.”

Heading home after an evening’s explorations, we make our way back through the woods. Out of nowhere, two young badger cubs come bowling through the undergrowth, round and soft like fluffy grey footballs. They startle as they see us, then bound away. We continue on but a movement ahead stops us in our tracks. A badger is upright at the

entrance to its sett, its nose in the air. It’s utterly still, and so are we. As quietly as we can we step away, lifting our feet and placing them down. The sky has darkened to deep indigo by the time we reach the car.

As we drive back to the Campbell’s home, Laurie points out the sites of other badger setts in the area, knowledge he’s accumulated through a lifetime of watching. Within 3-6km of the village, he knows of two dozen setts, but there will be more. It’s perfect habitat here, and despite constant road casualties, badger numbers are growing. Laurie’s aware that his peaceful work takes place in the wider context of England’s badger cull. “I can’t imagine how I’d feel if it happened here,” he says. “And I feel the situation’s getting more entrenched.”

We reach the house and settle at Laurie’s computer to look over the evening’s photographs. There’s a shuffling noise outside and we glance up. Through the glass door between Laurie’s office and the garden, a long black-and-white face is looking in at us. 📷



**ANNA LEVIN** is an author and a former section editor of BBC Wildlife Magazine; [annalevinwriting.co.uk](http://annalevinwriting.co.uk)

**FIND OUT MORE** Miranda Krestovnikoff joins Laurie Campbell to stake out his badgers for *The One Show*, weekdays at 7pm. Check *Radio Times* for details.