

# A GUIDE TO THE COUNTRYSIDE: WILD ANIMALS AND BIRDS

by Hunter Adair



## Introduction

There are a great variety of wild animals and birds in the countryside to see and study. One could spend a lifetime visiting the countryside watching and studying the wildlife, but will never be in a position to say they know everything about the antics and habits of all these creatures.

When you are studying the wildlife in the countryside it is very interesting. The individual creatures are all different and their behaviour has a certain pattern and routine, and if you can click into their routine and behaviour you will learn a great deal about each individual.

I have studied many animals and birds all my life and still do nearly every day, and to see and hear all these creatures is a wonderful experience. Some of these wild creatures such as foxes and badgers now live alongside man in his domestic life and have adapted will to city life.

## Foxes

Foxes are lovely creatures to watch and study, they can be so cheeky at times and make man look a bit of a fool. Vixens especially when they are feeding cubs in the spring of the year will come right into farm buildings and steal a hen, chicken or duck from straight under the farmer's nose. I once saw a vixen come right into the farmyard while four of us were sitting in a cart shed after lunch. The vixen grabbed an old cockerel not more than ten yards (9.14m) from us, which was strutting around in the farmyard with some hens.

As quick as a flash the four of us started chasing after the vixen. I was shouting at the top of my voice at her to drop the cockerel, as I headed the chase down through the field in front of the farm house. As the cockerel weighed about four pounds (1.8 kg) this slowed up the vixen and I nearly caught up with her when she suddenly dropped the cockerel and she ran on. I picked up the cockerel which seemed non the worse for his ordeal, he was a great favourite at the farm and no cheeky fox was going to steal him. We fenced off the yard after this incident to stop the vixen or any other fox getting into the farmyard where the cockerel and his hens were roaming free.

Foxes are silent hunters of the countryside, you may sometimes hear a vixen bark to warn her cubs if there is danger around. The winter months around December and January is the start of the breeding season for foxes and they have this "eerie" howl at night which is very frightening

Studying foxes is not as easy as studying other wild creatures such as badgers, because badgers are permanent residents all the year round in the same sett, where foxes are only residents in the same den for a few months in the spring of the year when the vixen is having her cubs.



*A young fox cub about 10 weeks old*



*Fox having it's leg repaired after being hit by a car*



# A GUIDE TO THE COUNTRYSIDE: WILD ANIMALS AND BIRDS

by Hunter Adair



## Foxes cont...

Foxes are very versatile animals and have learnt to live alongside man in the Cities, foxes will eat a variety of food such as rabbits, carrion, beetles, rodents, wild fruits, lambs and any wild birds and farm poultry they can catch.

Fox cubs are born between March and April, the size of the litter will vary between four and nine cubs, but few vixens ever seem to rear more. There is some evidence to suggest that a geld vixen, perhaps an older daughter may sometimes help to rear another vixen's cubs. I have never experienced this happening and I have never seen the dog fox helping to rear the cubs either, he will be long gone by then.

The size of a fox is no guide to its sex, there are many small dog foxes and large vixens and vice-versa, so looking at a fox crossing a field you can't tell easily if it is a dog fox or a vixen. Foxes weigh between 14 lbs (6.35 kg) and 17 lbs (7.71 kg), although there have been heavier foxes caught, a fox was caught at Ullswater in the Lake District which weighed 23 lbs (10.43 kg).

Chance plays a big part in your approach to foxes. I once baited a fox with rabbit gut and could have caught his brush, which is his tail. It is thought that foxes live until they are about four years old and the vixen lives within about a four mile radius, where dog foxes have been found some twenty miles away from where they were tagged.

Foxes are known for their cunning and awareness and they can hold their own among their numerous enemies, man being the main enemy of the fox. They are hunted ruthlessly in some parts of the country where there are a lot of sheep, as a fox will go for any lambs, or ewes which are weak or ill. The vixen is an extremely loyal mother, to the extent that she will risk her own life for the sake of her cubs. If you happen to surprise the vixen near to the den from behind a rock or tree, you won't get a chance to do it again.

When the cubs are very small and the vixen gets surprised or disturbed she is very likely to move the family to a much safer place. When the vixen is about the den with the cubs, it's possible you may be able to get close in to watch them. But if the vixen is returning from hunting, make no mistake her approach to the den will be determined by the wind.

She will come round until she has the wind full on her face and she'll dodge about so that her nose can cover a good sweep on either side of the den. The vixen will know everything lying ahead of her, including the watcher if you are on the ground anywhere near the den.

Fox cubs should always be treated by leaving them alone in their wild state.





*A badger leaving the set*



*A badger sow with her cub*

## Badgers

Badgers are fairly easy animals to watch and study, because they lie up during the day and hunt at night. The badger resides in the same sett all the year round and they are a very social animal by visiting their neighbours more or less at all times.

I always think the badgers have a similarity to dairy cows because they are more abundant in the west of the country.

The west of the country is slightly warmer than the east coast and there is also a higher rainfall up and down the west of the country, which produces more grass and insects. With the wetter warmer climate it is ideal for dairy cows and for badgers.

I have watched and studied badgers since I was a small boy. Badgers are creatures of habit and they eat a great variety of food such as worms, beetles, wild fruits, berries, birds, rabbits and they will even come into farm buildings looking for food, especially when they are sick. When a badger gets a tusk broken with a car, or with old age it will then come into the farm buildings looking for food where it will eat dried milk powder, cow nuts, or any poultry food which is lying around. The badger will do this if it can't dig properly for its own type of food, such as beetles and insects.

I have many times been very close to badgers to where I could touch them, especially young badgers in the spring of the year when they started coming out the sett in the early evening. Young badgers are very naive at this age and will come sniffing right up to your feet if you are standing close by the sett.

As the young badgers grow up they soon pickup the scent of humans and are quick to scurry underground when they get a whiff of your scent. When you are watching badgers it is always best to check the wind direction and keep down wind so that your scent is carried away from the badgers.

If you can get up off the ground into the tree when watching badgers you will get in much closer to watch them, as your scent will then be carried over the heads of the badgers. If its a quiet evening in the wood and you are not sure which direction the wind is coming from, just pull a leaf or two of grass, or a leaf or two from the nearest tree and throw them up into the air and see how they drop, this will tell you the wind direction.

The female badger is called a sow and the male badger is called a boar. The sow has between two and four cubs each year which are born between February and March. The sows I have studied over the years seem to have two cubs on average. Badgers don't fully hibernate in this country during the winter, although they slow down a great deal and seem only to visit their neighbours. During the winter when there is snow on the ground, the tracks and movements of badgers is mainly between other setts in the locality. Badgers in Sweden do however hibernate where the winters are much harder and colder.

I have examined and weighed many badgers over the years. The badgers weighed between 20 lbs (9.07 kg) and 30 lbs (13.60 kg). I know there are some badgers even heavier than this.

Badgers are fairly big animals and can be as big and heavy as Labrador dogs. On average badgers are about 36 inches long (0.91m), that's from the tip of the their nose to the tip of their tail. The badger has a fairly short tail which is about 8 inches long (0.2m). The hairs from badgers was at one time made into shaving and paint brushes, and the grease from the badger was supposed to be an excellent cure for wounds. It is also thought, at one time in some areas the hams of the badgers were eaten.

# A GUIDE TO THE COUNTRYSIDE: WILD ANIMALS AND BIRDS

by Hunter Adair



*Wild goats in Galloway*



*A red deer farm in Galloway - these are smaller than the Highland red deer*

## Wild goats

Like the Northumberland herd of “Wild Cattle” at Chillingham, there is also a herd of “Wild Goats” in the Galloway forest area in Scotland, which have been there for many years.

These wild goats roam the hills and moors and are not always easy seen. The wild herd in the Galloway forest are partly fenced off, to stop them from getting onto the main road and the fence also stops the visitors from trying to feed them. The goats are totally wild. So if you happen to be up in the Galloway area look out for the wild goats.

## Deer

The roe deer is a woodland animal, it is fairly shy and mostly feeds in the evening, although in some parts of Scotland in the Glencoe area the roe deer is quite often seen feeding during the day. Roe deer mainly lie up during the day, normally in a well hidden part of the wood where there is cover and where the sun is shining. I have many times disturbed a roe deer lying up in a wood during the mid morning, the deer have stood up and looked to see what disturbed it, then not being alarmed it slowly trotted further into the wood.

Roe deer eat a variety of greenery from grass, leaves, shrubs, moss, turnips, corn, clover, hips and fungi. The roe deer has a reddish brown colour in winter and they change to having a greyish coloured coat in the summer. The young deer or

fawns are born about the beginning of June, there are normally twins and they are able to follow the mother, the doe, when they are about two weeks old. When the fawns are born they are covered with white spots, the spots normally disappear when the fawns are about three months old.

The young fawns from the previous year are driven off by their mother during the month of May, before the new fawns arrive. Roe deer don't collect into herds, they prefer small family groups and they are territorial animals. Some roe deer live within a radius of two or three miles.

A friend of mine has a deer farm up in Galloway, in Scotland. He keeps a herd of around 250 red deer, they are a smaller red deer than the Scottish red deer. One thing I discovered about deer is you can't drive them as you can with sheep or cattle, because the deer just split into small groups of two or three, this is the deer breaking into the small family units again.

The “Rut” each year is during July and August. The roe deer don't have as keen a nose as the Scottish red deer, you can sometimes get very close to roe deer if the wind is in the right direction. The Scottish red deer are a different kettle of fish to get close to, they have a very sensitive nose. The roe deer cast their horns or antlers in November and the new antlers begin to grow almost immediately, while they are growing they are covered with a furry coat which is called velvet. When the antlers are fully grown the velvet starts to strip and the bucks help to shed this velvet by rubbing their antlers against the bushes and trees.

Roe deer make play rings during the “Rut”, these rings will either have a tree, rock, bush or shrub in the middle of the circle. The doe will run round and round in the circle followed by the buck, mating normally takes place in the play ring. Roe deer are always running round in circles. I have sometimes been very close to young fawns and the doe some distance away started running around in circles for quite some time. The play rings are a very special feature of the roe deer. Most farm animals have play times as well, young lambs play in groups, young bullocks also make play circles or play patches in the field where they graze.





*The Grouse*



## Grouse

The red grouse are Britain's hardest game birds. They are different from the pheasant and the partridge, because the grouse have feathered legs and feathered nostrils. The red grouse have similar short wings and a heavy whirring in flight.

There are several species of grouse in this country which include the ptarmigan and the capercaillie. Red grouse are the most commonest in the British Isles and are mainly confined to the north. The red grouse are dark coloured birds and never turn white in the winter as the ptarmigan do. Grouse are birds of heather moors and bogs and in hard weather during the winter grouse can be found descending on to farm land.

In Northumberland during a very hard winter I have seen the grouse come right down from the moors nearly to built up areas looking for food. One particularly hard winter in 1979 I saw two red grouse sitting up a tree next to a farm cottage, which is most unusual for such hardy birds.

Grouse are mainly vegetarians, their basic food is the shoots and seed heads of young ling heather. Grouse also eat caterpillars, slugs and a great variety of greenstuff on the moors, like rushes, ferns and mosses. When the weather is very hard grouse will eat turnip leaves, corn and barley.

The severe winter of 1979 wiped out thousands of grouse, because the heavy falls of snow filled the grouse nests before the eggs were hatched which was fatal, as many eggs never hatched out. Equally as fatal is drought with drying winds lasting for the first 10 days of the young bird's lives which can kill off the young birds in no time. Floods are another hazard of the grouse.

Vermin can be more destructive than the hardest Arctic, winter. The worse of the moorland killers, is the fox. The red silky coat of the fox blends in with the moor surroundings, the fox slips across the moor covering vast areas of ground with his cunning and awareness, he will raid nest after nest and silently kill for the sake of killing.

The Hoodie crow is another menace to the grouse, it flies about six feet above the heather and quarters the ground like spaniel dogs. Nothing escapes its sharp eyes, almost every grouse nest will be spotted and raided. The Hoodie crow will eat a few eggs on the ground as it raids a nest, then it will carry several eggs, one by one to its own nest which may be several miles away.

Weasels, stoats and adders are also enemies of the grouse chicks, many chicks are killed by these predators. Eagles are also enemies of the grouse, no matter how much one may admire the marvellous sight of their flight high in the sky, they are almost as bad as the crows in the Highlands.

The eagles dive and pick up the grouse as they sit on the nest, or as they sit on the ground. Eagles don't attack the grouse in flight, the moment an eagle appears above, all the grouse in the area will lift and fly off to the moor beyond, they know they are safe on the wing but doomed if they stay on the ground.

If you happen to be crossing the hills, or moors in your motor car and you see an odd grouse or two sitting on the road, they are there for a purpose to pick up grit and gravel which helps them to digest the heather. The gamekeepers put grit out on the moors for the grouse. As the grouse move around the moor during the day, they have a lying up area and you may just be lucky and see some grouse, it could be in mid morning, or around lunch time.



*The black headed gull - the farmer's friend as they often follow the plough looking for worms or mice*



*A hedgehog hunts at dusk and through the night*

## **Black headed gull**

The black headed gull is known as the farmer's friend, because in the spring and autumn this chocolate-brown headed gull can be seen in groups following the tractor and plough, or horse and plough hunting for worms and mice.

These gulls are very sociable birds and live in colonies. In the winter the brown headed feathers moult and are replaced with white ones. The black headed gull is one of the smaller gulls in Europe and is about 15 inches (381.00 mm) from head to tail. Both the female and the male build their nest on the ground with seaweed, coarse grass and twigs which are intricately woven in a small hollow, beside the sea. The nest is built at the end of April or early May and a few weeks later three speckled eggs are laid.

In the same area of the beach there are normally nest after nest only a few metres apart. The eggs hatch out in mid-June and as each down-feathered chick hatches out, both the male and female carry out a fascinating behaviour. Both birds pick up every bit of shell from the nest and drop every small piece of the shell some distance away from the nest.

It is not really known why the black headed gulls remove all the pieces of shell from their nest. I am pretty sure it is to stop airborne birds, such as crows and other gulls from spotting the nest and the young chicks. The young gulls grow very quickly and need a lot of food. The sea provides the gulls with a supply of molluscs and young fish, rubbish tips also provide a supply of food for the gulls and when the farmers start working the soil the gulls are there in flocks hunting for mice and worms.

# A GUIDE TO THE COUNTRYSIDE: WILD ANIMALS AND BIRDS

by Hunter Adair



*The adult swallow has long streaming forked tails*



*Heron watching for small fish and frogs pass by*

## Swallows

Swallows are lovely birds to watch and study and they are so fast, that they are very difficult to tell one from the other unless you either ring them or mark them. They nest in farm buildings and outhouses.

Swallows are small short-necked birds, with a forked tail and long wings, they also have a short flattened bill. You should be able to spot the swallow quite easily from the Sand Martin or the House Marten, because the swallow has a chestnut throat and forehead and the adults have this long forked tail, where the young swallows have a much shorter forked tail.

I can well remember in my youth watching the swallows on their return from Africa in the spring, many coming to the same farm buildings and nest sites. I used to tie some old hessian sacking up in the rafters in the barn as a hide where several swallows had their nests and I could watch the birds rearing their families only a metre or so away.

A friend of mine used put a ring on a few of the young birds before they left the nest. Some of the ringed birds used to come back to the same barn for two or three years, from where they were hatched.

I often met the swallows coming flying in and out of the byre door, they flew with such grace as they weaved and swung between me and the byre walls. A swallow's nest is built with soft wet mud which soon becomes very hard like cement, the

nest is open at the top. The swallow likes to build its nest in wooden rafters, the wood is dry and sheltered and the nest blends in with the woodwork. It is sometimes very difficult to spot a nest in old buildings.

The swallow is a summer visitor to this country, the birds arrive from Africa in early April, many times to the same nest site, but more often to the same building, they then set about either building, or repairing a nest to rear a new family. By the end of September the parents with their new young families collect into groups before heading south on their migratory flight back to Africa. If you happen to be visiting a farm during the summer, look out for the swallows with their long forked streaming tails and their swift graceful flight, as they keep turning low in the sky catching flies and insects.

## Heron

The heron is a water bird of marshland, rivers, lakes and streams. It is quite easy to recognise the heron because it has large dark grey wings, with a white head and neck. They also have a very powerful bill which they use for catching fish and frogs. The heron stands in shallow water for long periods at a time waiting for fish, or frogs to come passing by, they will also eat rats, or young duckling's if they get the chance. Herons nest mostly in fairly high trees, it seems quite peculiar that this long legged wading bird should be nesting in trees, one would have thought that nature meant them to nest on the ground. If you happen to surprise a heron on the riverside, or in marshland, you will see how slow and majestic it lifts off and flies away.

I many times sit hidden along a river bank when I spot a heron standing in the shallow water watching the flow of the water. Many times a heron will sit for long periods at a time with its long neck and head tucked into its shoulder, then when it gets its eye on a ripple or movement in the water it will stretch its long neck straight out and wait patiently for its prey to come close enough for it to grab it.

Hérons have little fear, they will come down into a domestic garden where there is a pond with gold-fish in it. The heron will sit on the edge of the pond and wait for the gold-fish to come near the water surface, then it will grab the fish with its strong beak. A single heron can clear a domestic pond of gold-fish in no time if it is left in peace.



*Hen pheasant sitting on her eggs*



*Hen pheasant eggs*

## **Pheasants**

The bright coloured feathers of a cock pheasant strutting about the countryside is a pleasure to see. Yet in the spring of the year, with the start of the breeding season cock pheasants are devils for fighting. Many wild cock birds seem to lose the fear of man when they start fighting, sometimes a pair of fighting cock birds will just ignore a human walking a few metres past them.

I have watched a pair of cock birds going at it hammer and tong with feathers flying in all directions for half an hour or more before they split up and that was only because they were distracted by a farm collie dog.

Pheasants are the most widespread game bird in the world, they were first introduced into Britain, North America and elsewhere from Asia around nine hundred years ago. The most common pheasant is the “old English” type, the male of which has a metallic green head and neck. But various other varieties of pheasants were also introduced later from the Far East, such as the green pheasant, or pheasants with other markings, like the white ring neck pheasant.

Many pheasants have also been inter-bred, not only with the “old English” type, but with other sub species which were introduced from time to time, so that now in Britain and much of Western Europe there is a great variety of coloured pheasants.

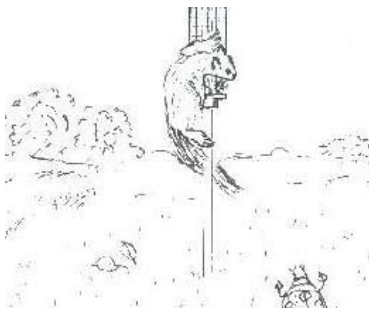
Pheasants don't like dark cold woods; they prefer open warm coverts and woods with some dry ground cover. Fir and spruce trees with the bottom branches lopped off and left lying make good ground cover. Pheasants also like the sun, they will mainly always make for the sunny side of the woods or coverts during the day.

The hen pheasant is not as pretty a bird as the cock pheasant, the hen is light brown in colour and she blends in well with the ground cover in the woods. A hen pheasant may lay as many as 16 eggs in a nest, the eggs are also brownish in colour like the hen bird.

It is thought that sheep and turkeys are the most stupid creatures on farms. Well I can tell you the hen pheasant is just about as stupid. I have sometimes known a hen pheasant to lay her eggs in some turf of long grass where cattle were grazing in the same field, the eggs got trampled on by the cattle, and didn't the hen pheasant start laying a second lot of eggs in the same place.

There were around 30 million pheasants reared in this country during 1998, by landowners, gamekeepers and farmers for the field sport of shooting, because of the interest in the sport by so many people in this country and from the many visitors from Europe and elsewhere who pay to come and shoot them. Pheasant shooting now has a turnover of millions of pounds every year.





## Squirrels

There are two types of squirrels in Britain. The grey squirrel and the red squirrel. The grey squirrel originally came from America and has become a bit of a nuisance in some parts of the country. It is a bigger squirrel than our native red squirrel and it can soon take over the ground of the red squirrel.

The grey squirrel is a pest to market gardeners and foresters. In some areas there are only the grey squirrel and it has become the dominant squirrel. It learns quickly to tolerate people and will soon be in and out of your house and buildings.

The red squirrel is our native squirrel and is much smaller than the grey squirrel. It has become scarce in some areas. The grey squirrel is partly to blame for this and the way we have managed the countryside over this past 30 years is also partly to blame by cutting down so many trees etc.

Squirrels breed in the spring of the year and they build their nest in a tree and it is called a “drey”. The small round type of nest they build can look like a birds nest.

The squirrels don't hibernate in the winter but when the weather is very bad with sleet, rain and snow, squirrels are likely to lie up for a few days. However when deep snow is lying on the ground and the sun is shining the squirrels can be seen darting over the top of the snow drifts.

Squirrels eat a variety of food such as pine cones, nuts, fruits and they will also eat birds eggs and young birds if they get the chance. The red squirrel can be very destructive if it is left to dart about the house and buildings. It will also be quick to give you a nip when it takes the notion. Cats and foxes are predators of the red squirrel and so are tawny owls. I once saw a tawny owl knock a red squirrel out of a tree a few metres from me, the red squirrel was dead when they both hit the ground.

With so many trees and plantations being cut down in the past 30 years in some areas the red squirrel has had to shift ground and with the pressure from the grey squirrels taking over some of the red squirrels territory there is now no red squirrels in some areas. Let's hope that with more trees and plantations being planted and the grey squirrels being controlled in some areas this lovely little animal, the red squirrel, will return to more parts of the countryside.

## Partridge

There are two types of partridges in this country. The grey or English partridge which is our native bird and the red-legged partridge which is a French bird and is bigger than the English partridge. Although both birds have the same name they are very different in many ways. The red-legged partridge is a very difficult bird to drive they just split up and fly in all directions. The red-legged partridge gets its name from its red-legs. While the grey-legged or English partridge gets its name from its grey-legs.

The English partridge is a very interesting bird to watch and study. Partridges like to nest in hedge-bottoms along the bottom of dry stone walls where there is long rough grass and plenty of cover. On the lower moors you sometimes find partridges nesting beside the red grouse among the heather especially when the heather is close to arable land. Some partridges also nest among clumps of nettles or near ditches where the grass and cover is dry.

While the female partridge is laying her eggs she covers the eggs with leaves or grass when she goes to feed and drink. She may lay as many as a dozen eggs.



*A pair of grey-leg partridges*

## **Partridge cont...**

If you are watching a partridge while she is laying her eggs keep well back until she is finished laying her eggs and is sitting well down on her eggs then you can go in a bit closer to watch her. One of the reasons why there is a shortage of partridges in some areas is because the modern silage or hay cutting machine cuts the grass so close to the ground that any wild birds such as the partridge and pheasants sitting on eggs are just chopped to pieces.

When the hay fields were cut with a horse and reaper there were about six inches (15 cm) of grass still standing and the wild birds nesting just ducked their heads and they were quite safe and hatched out their chicks.

The corncrake is another lovely bird which has left most parts of the countryside because of the same reason, they also like to nest in hay fields and along the bottom of stone walls where it is rough with long grass.