

BOVINE TB IN BRITISH WILD MAMMALS.

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Bovine tuberculosis caused by *Mycobacterium bovis* is a zoonotic infection with a wide range of mammalian hosts. In parts of the UK *M. bovis* infection in cattle is a persistent problem. The European badger (*Meles meles*) is implicated in the transmission of *M. bovis* to cattle, and is widely believed to constitute the most important reservoir of infection in British wildlife. TB is endemic in the British badger population. Infected individuals may excrete bacilli in sputum, faeces, urine and/or pus from wounds and burst abscesses. However, infected badgers can survive for relatively long periods and breed successfully, and the impact of the disease on population size and structure appears to be minimal. The foraging habits of badgers may bring them into close contact with pasture and farm buildings, providing opportunities for disease transmission to cattle. However, few studies have been carried out on the status of *M. bovis* infection in other wild mammals in the UK. Infection has been identified in several species of deer, foxes, moles, rats, mink, a feral ferret, farm cats and a field vole. Although the evidence from these studies does not support the existence of a significant self-maintaining reservoir of infection in any wild mammal other than the badger, there is a clear lack of sufficient data to rule out the involvement of other species. This paper describes the methodology and preliminary findings from a contemporary survey for *M. bovis* infection in wild mammals in south-west England, and discusses its limitations and the interpretation of results.