

Restricting damage to archaeological sites by burrowing animals

Why are archaeologists worried out burrowing animals?

Rabbits can do considerable damage to archaeological sites. They often favour banks of monuments and earthworks because the ground is softer and drier for their burrows.

These burrows will not only alter the physical shape of sites but also mix and destroy the archaeological information buried beneath the turf. They can also, by removing surface vegetation, encourage poaching and erosion by stock. Rabbit damage is made worse by the rapid increase of numbers possible on some warrens, as can be seen on the adjoining photograph.

Badger setts can also be dug into archaeological earthworks, favouring the softer ground of which many of these monuments are constructed. Though not as common as rabbits, the extent and size of badger tunnels can cause extensive damage.



This is one of the entrances to the Brown Caterthun hillfort in Angus. The bank on the right has been largely demolished by extensive rabbit burrowing, whereas the one on the left has been less severely affected, allowing it to survive as a more visible monument and also for more archaeological evidence to survive. Before the rabbit damage occurred the banks would have survived to the same height.



A heavy rabbit infestation has severely damaged this underground prehistoric chamber in Aberdeenshire. This has destroyed associated archaeological deposits and badly weakened the structure.

Foxes, moles, rats, voles, mice and other burrowing animals can potentially do damage to archaeological sites and may need to be controlled. However these are not generally considered a major problem.

What are the best methods of controlling burrowing animals on archaeological sites?

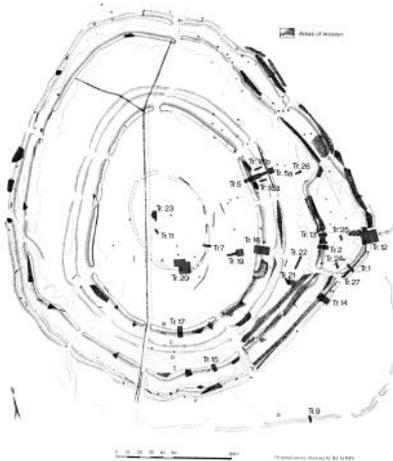
Though myxomatosis & haemorrhagic virus may temporarily limit numbers this is never a solution to rabbit control. Rabbits are best controlled by the traditional methods of shooting, trapping, gassing and grazing control. There are extensive publications

As a protected species badgers can only be removed with the consent of Scottish Natural Heritage.

GOOD PRACTICE

- You must consult Historic Scotland if planning to work on a Scheduled Monument.
- You must consult Scottish Natural Heritage if considering moving a badger sett.
- Consult your local authority archaeologist if considering doing work on an archaeological site that is not protected as a scheduled monument, particularly if seeking funding under the Rural Development Programme.
- When live trapping rabbits do not excavate holes for the traps within archaeological sites.
- If repairing damage or stopping up holes (eg for gassing) do not take materials such as turf and stones from another part of a damaged archaeological site (or from other archaeological sites).
- Take a photograph before and after your repair and supply copies to your local Historic Environment Record, so that there is a permanent record of where damage has occurred.
- Your Basic Farm and other payments may be at risk if you allow existing burrowing animals to further damage Scheduled Monuments under the cross compliance conditions [GAEC 7 Retention of landscape features](#) .

Further information - see Burrowing Animals section of [Managing Archaeology](#) on this website.
Historic Scotland's useful 24 page [TAN 18 Burrowing Animals and Archaeology](#) [1999] is available free from their website.



The areas shaded grey mark the areas of the Brown Caterthun hillfort, also shown overleaf that have been damaged by rabbits. This forms part of a Case study for Historic Scotland's TAN 18 Burrowing Animals and Archaeology.



Badgers with their extensive network of tunnels can do considerable damage to earthwork sites.