

MARK CARWARDINE



On the wild thoughts that won't let him sleep. This month:

Defra hits brock bottom

Defra has just announced the details of its harebrained persecution plan for English badgers, in a desperate bid to resolve the long-standing issue of bovine tuberculosis (bTB) in cattle.

The 'pilot cull areas' will be in West Gloucestershire and West Somerset, with a view to adding up to eight more in the future. Starting in the autumn, farmers in these areas will be given licences to kill at least 70 per cent of their local badgers.

It's complete and utter madness.

Can you imagine all these 'guns' patrolling the countryside – in the dark – and shooting at anything resembling a badger? How many healthy animals will they kill? How many will they injure? And who is going to stop them wiping out entire populations (no one will have a clue when 70 per cent have been killed)?

But what makes the plan more exasperating is that it's not even going to work. Thousands of badgers have been killed in previous culls and trials, and those made no significant long-term impact on the incidence of bTB. In fact, the evidence shows that killing badgers can increase the spread of the disease.

Even Defra's own figures suggest that, at best, culling badgers will achieve no more than a 16 per cent reduction

of bTB in cattle over nine years. That's pathetic.

I do sympathise with farmers. They must be utterly sick of the whole thing. But they shouldn't be blaming badgers – they should blame the Government for decades of errors, incompetence and cover-ups, and the resulting staggering lack of progress on this serious issue.

What's so frustrating is that there are alternatives, such as better and more frequent TB testing of cattle



Trapper's delight: a vaccinated badger, not a culled one.



The scientific evidence shows that killing badgers can increase the spread of bTB.

and vaccines for both badgers and cattle (which conservationists have been recommending for years).

If the Government didn't keep disregarding science in favour of an old smokescreen, the problem could have been solved by now.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer, writer, conservationist and BBC TV presenter.