



# Wildlife Notes

## Badger (*Taxidea taxus*)

### Description

Badgers are short-legged carnivores with stout, fat bodies and sharp claws. Sometimes mistakenly considered a rodent, the badger is a member of the weasel family which includes otters, skunks and wolverines. An elongated head with small ears and a stripe from nose to tail, combined with a triangular patch ('badges') and distinct white stripe on each cheek, make badgers easy to identify.

The lower jaw of the badger is articulated and hinged deep into the skull. This enables them to clench and hold with fierce tenacity, but also limits jaw movement to hinging open and shut or sliding forward and back.

### Range

The badger lives in open grasslands and meadows near the edge of woodlands where alluvial soil (deposits of sediment found in floodplains) is easy to dig and where prey such as mice, squirrels, and groundhogs are more available.

The badger's range extends throughout the central and western United States, northern Mexico and south-central Canada. However, in much of its former habitat — the prairie regions of eastern Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri and Illinois — the badger is increasingly rare.

### Behavior

Sometimes spotted kicking dirt in a fan-shaped deposit outside their burrows, badgers are highly adapted diggers. Burrows can be identified by the elliptical shaped entrance which accommodates their body shape. Usually, a badger's home range includes several burrows and can extend over many kilometers. Each den is occupied only a few days as the badger travels in search of food. Unused burrows sometimes provide homes for other wildlife such as burrowing owls.

Badger dens are tidy in comparison to their feeding areas. When searching for food, a badger may overturn an area two meters or larger. Intelligent hunters, badgers sometimes plug the den entrances of rodents and wait for prey at one remaining opening.

Like their skunk cousins, badgers produce an unpleasant, musky emission from anal glands to deter predators. Badgers also can dig with remarkable speed to escape underground.

Normally solitary and diurnal (active during daylight), badgers become nocturnal if human activity is continuously present.



## Diet

The badger's primary diet of rodents includes ground squirrels, prairie dogs, gophers and mice. This diet is supplemented with insects, invertebrates, reptiles, ground-dwelling birds and eggs. Mice are an important food source during winter when other prey are hibernating. Studies in captivity have shown that badgers require at least 2.3 squirrels to meet their daily energy needs.

Coyotes have been observed accompanying badgers while hunting. It is uncertain whether this is a 'hunting partnerships' or simply coyotes waiting to catch an escaped rodent. However, studies do demonstrate that coyotes consume more rodents and travel less when following a hunting badger.

## Breeding

Solitary most of the year, badgers seek mates from late summer to early fall, and males may breed with more than one female.

Badgers experience delayed implantation during which pregnancies are suspended until December–February. Young are born from late March–April. Litters range from one to five young. Only one litter is produced each year.

Badgers are born blind and helpless, and eyes open at four to six weeks. Females feed young solid food prior to complete weaning. Young emerge above ground at five–six weeks old.

Juveniles disperse from late May–August in search of a new home range. This may require traveling 100 km or more and involve crossing rivers, highways and farmland. Dispersing juveniles face starvation, traffic and predation by eagles, cougars and coyotes.

The highest mortality for badgers occurs as juveniles disperse, but life expectancy for the few that survive is approximately 14 years.

## Protected Furbearer

The badger is a protected furbearer in New Mexico and may be hunted and trapped.



*Photo courtesy of the National Digital Library – United States Fish and Wildlife Service.*



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