

# The American Badger- *Taxidea taxus*

By Jenna Kennedy

The American badger- *taxidea taxus*- is a short-legged, short-tailed member of the weasel family, easily recognized for its stout body, distinctive coloring, and large, razor sharp claws on its forefeet. The badger's face is dark brown or black in color with white cheeks and a white stripe that extends from the nose over the top of the head. Both cheeks have a black slash that runs from the front of the ears down to the jaw line, completing the American badger's signature look. The badger's body is covered in short, shaggy hair that varies in color from white to rust, brown to black, and many colors in between. The legs and feet are usually dark brown or black in color. Badgers average between twenty-two and thirty inches in length and weigh between thirteen to twenty-five pounds.



The badger primarily resides in spacious, open country such as grasslands, old fields and pastures with plenty of small rodents and insects for feeding. Rarely will badgers venture into woody habitats. American badgers typically reside in the western part of the continent. The badger was not common or widespread in the Great Lakes region until European settlers came in and cleared much of the forests, creating an ideal habitat for this grassland dwelling mammal. This extensive and widespread clearing of forests allowed the badger to expand eastward and northward into the Great Lakes region of the continent (Kurta 239).

From 2003 to 2009 there have been fifty-seven observations of badgers through the Wisconsin NatureMapping program. Of these fifty-seven observations, a total of seventy-seven badgers have been sighted. These observations have been scattered throughout the state with observations in twenty counties, the majority of these observations being in Eau Claire, Dunn, La Crosse and Trempealeau County. This may be due to the fact that a larger portion of Wisconsin NatureMappers have been trained in these counties.

The badger is a solitary creature, preferring to spend much of its time alone, away from the company of fellow badgers. The exceptions to this general rule would be the short periods of time when badgers are mating and raising their offspring. Badgers are mainly nocturnal creatures and will wait until dark to emerge from their dens unless they are provoked by a predator or extreme hunger. They may occasionally be seen in the early morning or late in the afternoon and early evening right before dusk. The badger is an extremely cautious and wary animal and may go unnoticed for many years in an area where it is relatively common.



Image courtesy of International Hunter Education Association website

With the exception of nursing mothers, this mammal rarely occupies the same site for more than one day during the warmer months. However, during the winter months a badger reduces its above ground activity by more than 90% and remains in its den for days at a time. The soil insulates the mammal in its underground den, saving it from the harsh winter weather; even if the temperature outside drops below  $-15^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $5^{\circ}\text{F}$ ), the temperature inside the den remains near  $2^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $36^{\circ}\text{F}$ ). While the badger does not hibernate, it is capable of going into a state of rest where its body temperature drops in order to conserve energy. When at rest, the badger is capable of dropping its body temperature from a normal  $38^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $100^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) down to  $29^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $84^{\circ}\text{F}$ ). This drop in temperature can last for short periods of time averaging fifteen hours. In addition to lowering its body temperature,

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the badger is able to survive the cold winter months by living off its body fat and occasionally venturing above ground to search for food. While a badger's body fat averages more than 30% of its total body mass in November, it averages less than 20% in March (Kurta 241).

Mating occurs during August and September. Although mating typically takes place during these months, the female does not become pregnant until much later, due to the fact that the blastocyst delays implantation until February. The gestation period lasts roughly five to six weeks, resulting in the birth of two to five offspring sometime

between late March and early May. The offspring's eyes open after one month, and weaning occurs by two to three months; juveniles leave the den after five to six months. Of all the female offspring, 30% will mate in their first summer (Kurta 241); however, males are not sexually mature until they are fourteen months old and will therefore not breed until the following year (Whitaker Jr. and Hamilton Jr. 464).



The badger is a strong animal, and can be quite ferocious when confronted by potential enemies. In the event of an attack, the badger has a few natural lines of defense.



Image courtesy of New Hampshire Public Television website

The loose skin around its neck allows the badger to maneuver out of a predator's grip and its strong teeth and large front claws are capable of doing great damage to its opponent. Also, being that the badger is stout and sits low to the ground, it is all but impossible for a predator to attack the badger's throat and/or belly. Badgers will emit various grunts and growls when threatened, but perhaps the most likely emission to be heard is its trademark hiss.

The badger hunts primarily during the nighttime when it wakes and leaves its underground den. Its diet consists mainly of rodents such as gophers, squirrels, woodchucks, voles and mice. In addition to these animals, badgers also feed on ground-nesting birds, bird eggs, snails, reptiles, grubs, caterpillars and adult insects. Badgers often obtain their food by digging their prey out of underground burrows. It is estimated that an active seventeen pound badger will need to consume roughly two ground squirrels a day in order to meet its basic energy requirements (Whitaker Jr. and Hamilton Jr. 463). Because potential prey often use old badger dens for shelter, badgers can easily hunt just by traveling from den to den. They can usually tell if another animal is residing in their den from the disturbance in the dirt and the smell surrounding the den. When a badger suspects there is a creature inside their old den, they will often plug all but one entrance to the den, and then dig their prey out.

The leading causes of death for badgers are automobiles, shooting, and fur trapping. The maximum life span of a badger in confinement is twenty-six years. Badgers

in the wild live considerably shorter lives, only surviving four to five years in the wild; a few will survive as long as 14 years (Kurta 241-42).



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Although badgers are solitary and nocturnal creatures, you may be surprised by what you find if you keep your eyes peeled. Look for badgers in the early morning or late in the afternoon and early evening right before dusk. Remember that badgers favor spacious grasslands and fields where there is a substantial rodent population for them to feed upon. Badgers can be difficult to find in the wild, so if you come across this elusive mammal feel free to share your experience with others on Wisconsin NatureMapping!

#### Works Cited

Kurta, Allen. *Mammals of the Great Lakes Region*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1995. Print.

Whitaker Jr., John, and William Hamilton Jr. *Mammals of the Eastern United States*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1998. Print.

