



American Badgers

Digging Machines

Badger species are found in parts of Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America. All badgers are known for their impressive digging skills but there are significant differences in social and territorial behaviors, size, colors, and markings between species. The species found in North America, *Taxidea taxus*, is commonly called the American badger. The American badger's rangeland extends from southwest Canada and the western Great Lakes regions in the north, to central Mexico in the south. They are found along the Pacific coast and eastward to nearly the Mississippi River. They prefer open plains or fields and deciduous forests. There are four subspecies of badgers in the U.S. and their ranges overlap, especially in the central Midwest. The subspecies found in Mexico and the southwest (California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, & Texas), is *Taxidea taxus berlandieri*. This subspecies differs in several ways: they are at home in desert flats and alluvial fans adjacent to desert mountains, and they are generally smaller than other subspecies. Even within the subspecies however, there appears to be habitat dependant size and behavior differences. In the cooler upper plateaus animals tend to be larger and become semi-dormant (respiratory and heart rates slow, and activity occurs only on milder days) during the winter months. Desert dwellers tend to be smaller, are active year around, and tend to be nocturnal in an effort to keep cool and avoid excessive water loss.

American badgers' bodies are broad and flat, covered predominantly with reddish-brown to gray hairs tipped in white. Their faces are white, with a dark patch on each cheek and a wide dark patch extending from the top of their heads down their noses. They have a white stripe within this dark patch that begins midway between the tip of the nose and eyes and extends back over the top of the head to the neck or shoulders. Sometimes the stripe may extend along the center back nearly to the tail. Their chins, throats, and bellies are white to pale red-buff in color. Their legs are short and dark. Their bodies range in length from 17-29 inches, their tails from 4-6 inches. Males are significantly larger than females. Their front feet are slightly webbed, have long claws, and are designed for fast, powerful digging. A badger can dig itself safely into a burrow in less than 1 minute.

American badgers are solitary animals. Generally, the only social contact for males is during mating and for females is during mating and while rearing cubs. Because social interactions are limited, an extensive vocabulary is not necessary and vocalizations are limited to a few grunts and hissing when confronted.

American badgers are generally nocturnal (although can be active during both the day and night) and their vision is quite good. When hunting, however, they dig rapidly into rodents' burrows, and use their acute senses of smell and hearing to locate their prey hiding underground. Badgers are primarily carnivorous, with ground squirrels, mice, prairie dogs, cottontails, and jackrabbits comprising the predominant part of their diet. They also eat cereal crops such as wheat when available, and during the summer, insects, snakes, and eggs are a part of their diets. Badgers have an important positive environmental impact- since their diets consist primarily of rodents, they provide a method of "natural" pest control.

During summer their burrows are temporary, and badgers tend to wander throughout their home range in search of food. Because they are nomadic they leave behind dens for use by other mammals. The dens, which may have more than one entrance, are usually 13-16 feet long and up to 6 feet deep. There is usually a central chamber filled with dry bedding. During winter and while rearing cubs, their dens are usually permanent, larger, and more complex. American badgers do not mark or defend a territory, and individual ranges of either sex may overlap extensively.

Badgers are not monogamous, and males two years or older will breed with any female in an overlapping or nearby range. Females are capable of reproducing at one year of age. Although badgers breed in late summer and early fall, implantation does not take place until sometime from December through February. After implantation, gestation begins and lasts about six weeks. Most litters contain 2-3 cubs and arrive in March or April. The polygamous and solitary nature of American badgers obliges the female to care for the young on her own. Cubs are born blind and helpless with short, soft, silky hair. Their eyes open at approximately 4-6 weeks of age. The female nurses the cubs until 6-8 weeks old. At the time of weaning she will start to bring dead rodents to the den for consumption. The cubs may leave shortly after weaning or stay until breeding season.

Badgers can live up to 14 years in the wild but there is a high mortality rate during the first two years of life, often due to starvation. If given the opportunity, mountain lions occasionally feed on badgers. Like most predators, however, the greatest threat to badgers is man. They fall prey to the traps and poisons set for other predators, such as coyotes, and are affected by traffic and the loss of available habitat as man advances into wilderness areas.