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BADGERS

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BADGERS

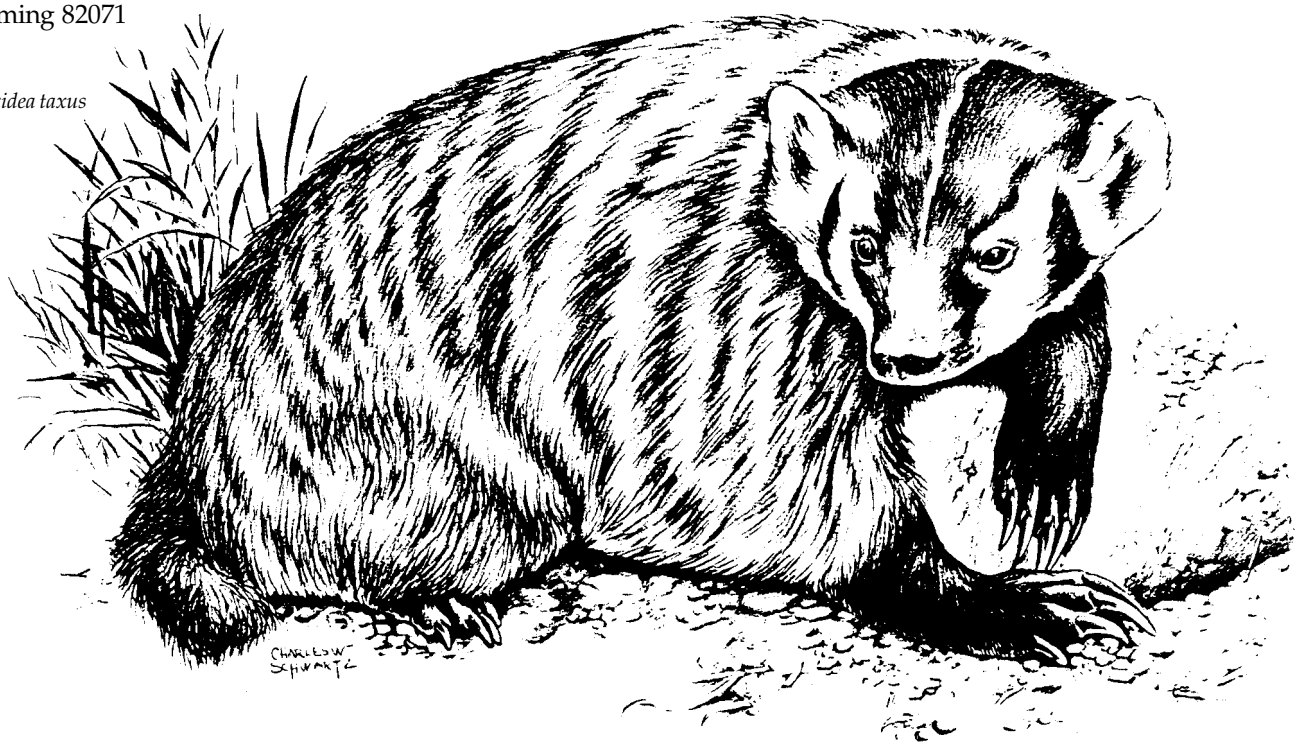


Fig. 1. Badger, *Taxidea taxus*

Damage Prevention and Control Methods

Exclusion

Generally not practical.

Habitat Modification

Controlling rodent populations may make habitats less suitable for badgers.

Frightening

Bright lights.

Repellents

None are registered.

Toxicants

None are registered.

Fumigants

None are registered.

Trapping

Steel leghold traps.

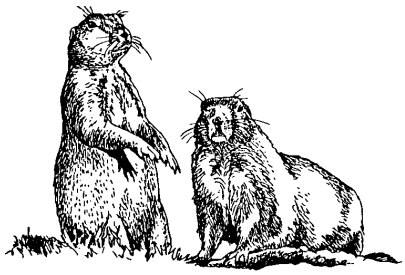
Live traps.

Shooting

Where permitted, shooting with a rifle, handgun, or shotgun is effective.

Identification

The badger (*Taxidea taxus*) is a stocky, medium-sized mammal with a broad head, a short, thick neck, short legs, and a short, bushy tail. Its front legs are stout and muscular, and its front claws are long. It is silver-gray, has long guard hairs, a black patch on each cheek, black feet, and a characteristic white stripe extending from its nose over the top of its head. The length of this stripe down the back varies. Badgers may weigh up to 30 pounds (13.5 kg), but average about 19 pounds (8.6 kg) for males and 14 pounds (6.3 kg) for females. Eyeshine at night is green.



PREVENTION AND CONTROL OF WILDLIFE DAMAGE — 1994

Cooperative Extension Division
Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources
University of Nebraska - Lincoln

United States Department of Agriculture
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
Animal Damage Control

Great Plains Agricultural Council
Wildlife Committee

Fig. 2. Range of the badger in North America.

Range

The badger is widely distributed in the contiguous United States. Its range extends southward from the Great Lakes states to the Ohio Valley and westward through the Great Plains to the Pacific Coast, though not west of the Cascade mountain range in the Northwest (Fig. 2). Badgers are found at elevations of up to 12,000 feet (3,600 m).

Habitat

Badgers prefer open country with light to moderate cover, such as pastures and rangelands inhabited by burrowing rodents. They are seldom found in areas that have many trees.

Food Habits

Badgers are opportunists, preying on ground-nesting birds and their eggs, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and insects. Common dietary items are ground squirrels, pocket gophers, prairie dogs, and other smaller rodents. Occasionally they eat vegetable matter. Metabolism studies indicate that an average badger must eat about two ground squirrels or pocket gophers daily to maintain its weight. Badgers may occasionally kill small lambs and young domestic turkeys, parts of which they often will bury.

General Biology, Reproduction, and Behavior

Badgers are members of the weasel family and have the musky odor characteristic of this family. They are especially adapted for burrowing, with strong front legs equipped with long, well-developed claws. Their digging capability is used to pursue and capture ground-dwelling prey. Typical burrows dug in pursuit of prey are shallow and about 1 foot (30 cm) in diameter. A female badger will dig a deeper burrow (5 to 30 feet long [1.5 to 9 m]) with an enlarged chamber 2 to 3 feet (0.6 to 0.9 m) below the surface in which to give birth. Dens usually have a single, often elliptical entrance, typically marked by a mound of soil in the front.

Badgers have a rather ferocious appearance when confronted, and often make short charges at an intruder. They may hiss, growl, or snarl when fighting or cornered. Their quick movements, loose hide, muscular body, and tendency to retreat quickly into a den provide protection from most predators. Larger predators such as mountain lions, bears, and wolves will kill adult badgers. Coyotes and eagles will take young badgers.

Badgers are active at night, remaining in dens during daylight hours, but are often seen at dawn or dusk. During winter they may remain inactive in their burrows for up to a month, although they are not true hibernators. Male badgers are solitary except during the mating season, and females are solitary except when mating or rearing young. Densities of badgers are reported to be about 1 per square mile (0.4/km^2) although densities as high as 5 to 15 badgers per square mile (1.9 to 5.8/km^2) have been reported. An adult male's home range may be as large as 2.5 square miles (6.5 km^2); the home range of adult females is typically about half that size. Badgers may use as little as 10% of their range during the winter.

Badgers breed in summer and early fall, but have delayed implantation, with active gestation beginning around February. Some yearling females may breed, but yearling males do not. As many as 5 young, but usually 2 or 3, are born in early spring. Young nurse for 5 to 6 weeks, and they may remain with the female until midsummer. Most young disperse from their mother's range and may move up to 32 miles (52 km). Badgers may live up to 14 years in the wild; a badger in a zoo lived to be 15 1/2 years of age.

Damage and Damage Identification

Most damage caused by badgers results from their digging in pursuit of prey. Open burrows create a hazard to livestock and horseback riders. Badger diggings in crop fields may slow harvesting or cause damage to machinery. Digging can also damage earthen dams or dikes and irrigation canals, resulting in flooding and the loss of irrigation water. Diggings on the shoulders of roads can lead to erosion and the collapse of road surfaces. In late summer and fall, watch for signs of digging that indicate that young badgers have moved into the area.

Badgers will occasionally prey on livestock or poultry, gaining access to protected animals by digging under fences or through the floor of a poultry house. Tracks can indicate the presence of badgers, but to the novice, badger tracks may appear similar to coyote tracks (see **Coyotes**). Claw marks are farther from the toe pad in badger tracks, however, and the front tracks have a pigeon-toed appearance (Fig. 3).

Badgers usually consume all of a prairie dog except the head and the fur along the back. This characteristic probably holds true for much of their prey; however, signs of digging near the remains of prey are the best evidence of predation by a badger. Because badgers will kill black-footed ferrets, their presence is of concern in reintroduction programs for this endangered species.

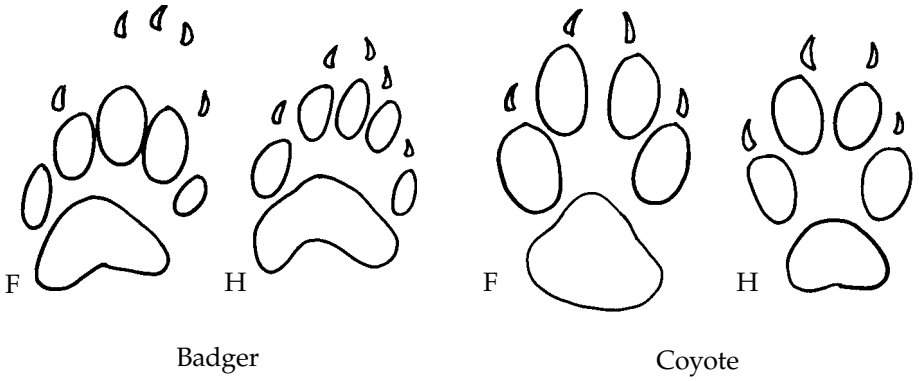


Fig. 3. Badger tracks compared to coyote tracks.

Legal Status

In some states, badgers are classified as furbearers and protected by regulated trapping seasons, while in other states they receive no legal protection. Contact your state wildlife agency before conducting lethal control of badgers.

Damage Prevention and Control Methods

Exclusion

Mesh fencing buried to a depth of 12 to 18 inches (30 to 46 cm) can exclude most badgers. The cost and effort to construct such fences, however, preclude their use for large areas.

Habitat Modification

Control of rodents, particularly burrowing rodents, offers the greatest potential for alleviating problems resulting from badger diggings. For example, controlling ground squirrels or pocket gophers in alfalfa fields will likely result in badgers hunting elsewhere.

Frightening

Badgers may be discouraged from a problem area by the use of bright lights at night. High-intensity lamps used to light up a farmyard may discourage badger predation on poultry.

Trapping

Badgers can be removed by using live traps and/or leghold traps set like those for coyotes (see **Coyotes**). Snares have been used with mixed success. Badgers often return to old diggings. A good bait for badgers is a dead chicken placed within a recently dug burrow. Fur trapping may reduce badger populations locally, but badger pelts are generally of little value and most badgers are caught incidentally.

Leghold traps (No. 3 or 4) are adequate to hold a badger. Rather than staking the trap to the ground, it is better to attach it to a drag such as a strong limb or similar object that the badger cannot pull down into its burrow. Badgers will often dig in a circle around a stake, sometimes enough to loosen the stake and drag the trap away.

Shooting

Badgers can be controlled by shooting. Spotlighting, if legal, can be effective. Incidental shooting has contributed to reducing their numbers in some areas.

Acknowledgments

This chapter is a revision of the chapter on badgers by Norman C. Johnson in the 1983 edition of *Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage.* F. Robert Henderson and Steve Minta provided information included in this chapter.

Figures 1 and 2 from Schwartz and Schwartz (1981).

Figure 3 from Wade (1973).

For Additional Information

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