



# American Badger

*Taxidea\* taxus\*\**

\*Greek for “badgerlike.” \*\*Latin for “badger.”

By Dave Stalling

A few years ago, I was cautiously crawling through sage and prickly pear north of Dillon, attempting to get within bow range of a bedded pronghorn buck, when movement and noise caught my attention. Only 10 yards from me was a badger busily digging away. Was it hunting a ground squirrel, prairie dog, or burrowing owl? Excavating a new home? I forgot about the pronghorn, remained still and undetected, and enjoyed the rare show for maybe an hour. Though I had spotted their tracks many times, and once sprained an ankle stepping in one of their holes, I had not actually seen more than a few badgers over the years. And for good reason: They keep to themselves and are mostly nocturnal, doing their hunting, roaming, and digging at night. Apparently I’d run into an insomniac, and was the luckier for it.

## Identification

The American badger is a member of Mustelidae, a diverse family of carnivorous

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mammals that also includes the weasel, fisher, and wolverine. With its stout, yellowish-gray body, short legs, and distinct black-and white-striped head, the American badger looks like a cross between a large raccoon, a skunk, and a wolverine. These heavy-bodied animals range from 22 to 28 inches long and weigh 13 to 25 pounds. Their shaggy hair is yellowish around the belly, while the upper body is generally grizzled silver with a white stripe extending from the snout to the shoulders. Badgers also have a thick black stripe running from each ear over the eye to their flat, triangular-shaped snout. A blackish badge adorns each cheek. The tail is small and bushy. Their sharp, 1-inch-long front claws, partially webbed toes, and powerful limbs make them extremely proficient excavators, often able to dig faster than their fleeing prey.

## Habits

Badgers eat small mammals: mostly ground squirrels but also pocket gophers, moles, marmots, prairie dogs, deer mice, and voles. The opportunistic feeders also prey on ground-nesting birds, such as bank swallows and burrowing owls, and eat eggs, lizards, amphibians, fish, insects, and some plants.

A badger will sometimes hunt coopera-

tively with a coyote. The canid chases a ground squirrel or other prey into a burrow where the badger can get to it, or the badger will scare the prey out of a burrow where the coyote can catch it. When hunting together, the two predators leave few avenues of escape.

Though they don’t hibernate, badgers become far less active in winter—sleeping for up to 30 hours at a time. For shelter they usually dig their own “setts,” or burrowed dens, but sometimes use abandoned burrows of other animals, such as foxes. Badger

burrows provide shelter for other species, and their digging helps aerate soil, aiding plant growth.

Badgers are mostly solitary, but during the summer breeding season a male will expand his territory to seek out mates, often breeding with more than one female. Like other mustelids, badgers have what’s known as delayed implantation. The female’s fertilized eggs are inactive through winter, then attach to the wall of her uterus in February. Litters of two or three young are born in March or early April.

A male badger is known as a boar, a female a sow, and a young badger a cub. A group of badgers is known as a cete (pronounced *seet*).

## Range and habitat

American badgers are found throughout the western and central United States, and from central British Columbia south to northern Mexico. They range throughout Montana.

Badgers can be found from high alpine country to low valleys in open prairie grasslands, shrub grasslands, deserts, fields, and pastures. They also live in farmlands and other open areas where they can find abundant small, ground-dwelling rodents such as ground squirrels.

## Status

Though classified as endangered in Canada, badgers are abundant in much of the western United States. In Montana, badgers are considered a common nongame wildlife species that may be hunted or trapped year-round. 🦡