

The Badger

Badgers, *Taxidea taxus*, are very interesting animals that can be found in many places around the world. Unfortunately, badgers are endangered. A better understanding of these creatures may help protect their future.

Characteristics

The badger is a stocky animal with short but extremely strong legs. Their forelegs are particularly well developed with long claws, which is particularly useful for digging. Badgers are equipped with a long nose and, as a result, have a fantastic sense of smell. Including their tails, they are around 1 meter (3 feet) long, and usually weigh 9-11kg (20-25 pounds) but can even get as heavy as 20kg (44 pounds). Most badgers have white and black faces, the black being primarily around the eyes. They have greyish or brownish body fur, with the legs and under-parts being of an even darker shade.

Lifecycle

Badgers can give birth anytime between November and August, but the majority of cubs are born in February. 1-3 cubs are born and they then spend about 8-10 weeks underground and emerge around May. It is important for badgers to be born early in the year, so that they have plenty of time to eat, grow, and put on fat for the enduring winter months. After about 10-12 weeks, young badgers disperse and lead lives without their parents. Many badgers die in the first two years of life because of starvation or from being eaten by predators, which is probably due to their weakness and small size.

On average badgers in the wild live between 8-10 years. In captivity badgers can live up to 26 years. It is possible to be able to determine how old a badger is by looking at how worn their teeth are. This is due to earthworms being a part of their diet. The earth causes the white enamel of their teeth to wear down at an early age.

Habitat

Badgers are quite solitary mammals that prefer open planes, farmlands, and edges of forests. Badgers usually dig large but simple burrows for shelter and protection. The burrows usually consist of only one tunnel; however some burrows, especially breeding dens, are slightly more complex and have a few side tunnels branching off the main tunnel. Badgers will often occupy dens dug by either other badgers or other species, extending them if necessary.

Badgers inhabit most treeless regions of North America. Badgers are especially common in Canada, more specifically in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. The badger population in British Columbia and Ontario is not as high. In British Columbia they are mostly found in the dry grassland regions of the Okanagan.

Diet

Badgers are omnivorous animals, but animal sources form the majority of their diet.

Badgers tend to feast on small mammals such as mice, gophers, chipmunks, and prairie dogs, along with other burrowing animals and earthworms. Badgers will also eat some reptiles, like small crocodiles and lizards; insects, like wasps and bees; and dead carcasses of almost any animal. Fish and birds also form a small part of the badger's diet. Some badgers are also known to eat antelope and rabbit.

With the badger's amazing sense of smell and appetite for bees, it is no surprise that badgers like honey. Also on the vegetarian side of the badger's diet are many grains, such as wheat, oats, and barley. Badgers also like to feast on fruit and nuts when they are available.

Behaviour

Badgers are mostly nocturnal, but may exhibit daytime activity if there is not much disturbance from humans and if food supplies are low. Females commonly search for food during the day when they need to feed their young. Badgers that live in areas with cold winters have varied activity patterns and are much less active in the winter. Those that live in warmer climates do not tend to have this seasonal variation in activity patterns.

Threats

Adult badgers are not very vulnerable animals, on the other hand, the cubs are in much more danger, and may be taken by larger mammals or birds. It is also possible for larger badgers to be attacked, but they are much more capable of defending themselves with tooth, claw, and sometimes their odour. Badgers recognise each other by their own distinct scent, and this musky smell has proven to be beneficial.

Badgers are usually wanted by humans for their fur, which is used to make fine quality paint brushes. Human encroachment on forests and grasslands also poses a threat to their habitat.

To assist the survival of badgers, humans should gain more understanding of this animal and its habitat. Establishing protected areas, reducing the use of rodenticides, and adopting appropriate forest management practices are all ways to help sustain the declining badger population.

Other Interesting Facts

- Badgers are closely related to otters, stoats, weasels, and polecats.
- Badger comes from the French word "becheur" meaning digger.
- A group of badgers is a sett, coming from the ancient word "cette," which also means a group of badgers.

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