



NATURE DETECTIVES

Spring 2014

Dig Badger Dig

Badger ambled across the grassy field, pausing now and then to sniff the spring air. She smelled Coyote's scent on the breeze. Coyote wasn't far away, but he didn't worry her. Badger had a bold and feisty attitude. And, she had sharp, pointy teeth. She expected Coyote would back off any fight if she opened her mouth in a full-throated snarl.



She was a typical American badger, oddly squat and chunky, longhaired and rather mop-shaped. As Badger walked, the long guard hairs on her coat almost brushed the ground. She only weighed as much as a house cat, but she had strong muscles in her neck and shoulders, muscles for digging.

Ignoring Coyote, Badger stopped at a hole and sniffed the prairie dog odors wafting from the tunnel entrance. Sometimes on the hunt for prairie dogs she pushed rocks and dirt over exit holes to shut off escape for her prey, but today she didn't take the time. She was in a hurry to get back to her three babies. She'd left them huddled together in their grassy nest in a den she'd dug deep underground at the end of a long burrow.

Pull Out and Save



Hunting Success

Badger started digging with her small but tough fore paws. Her front toes, with their two-inch-long claws, quickly enlarged the rodent hole to badger-size. Her back paws, built with short, shovel-like claws, flung dirt high into the air behind her.

Dinner for two

Coyote saw the dirt flying and knew it meant dinner. He trotted over to another hole in the tunnel system. Coyote got there just in time to grab a fleeing prairie dog. A second prairie dog saw Coyote and turned back into the hole. Badger was there to snatch her hard-earned prey. Her hunger satisfied, Badger exited the tunnel. Someday, she'd enlarge this burrow enough to use as a cozy sleeping den, but now she needed to scurry home.

Digging for Dinner

American badgers will eat nearly anything they come across on their rambling search for food, but they seem to prefer small burrowing rodents. They use their keen sense of smell and sharp hearing to find and dig up underground prey. They dine on prairie dogs, ground squirrels, mice and other small rodents. Young rabbits, ground-nesting birds, eggs and snakes are also on the menu. Sometimes they eat seeds and grains. Insects and worms are often prey for younger badgers.

Badger Babies Are Born in Spring

Like puppies and kittens, badgers are born with little fur and their eyes stay closed for a month. After about six weeks, they venture outside the burrow. They play rough attack games with each other and their mom. Badger dads have nothing to do with their care. Soon their mom will take them hunting with her and by fall they will leave her. Except when they live with their moms or for a short time when they find a mate, badgers live alone. Some survive as long as 10 to 14 years but most live only 4 to 5 years. Young badgers can fall prey to golden eagles, coyotes, bobcats, cougars or dogs.



Mom badgers usually stay in one den while their babies are tiny.

Badgers on the Move

Badgers without babies typically move often. During the summer, they may travel 5 to 8 miles each night, and snooze in a different burrow each day. These furry digging experts leave a trail of burrows behind them as they go about their work. They are active all year, but they wander less during the winter. They don't hibernate, but they go into a deeper sleep for days at a time when the weather is really freezing and stormy.

Badgers Are Community Home Builders

Empty burrows are rarely unoccupied for long. Badgers may re-use their old burrows. Coyotes and foxes take advantage of prebuilt badger dens to raise their families. Burrowing owls and skunks will too. Rattlesnakes and other grassland reptiles find shelter from heat and cold, summer and winter, in badger-dug tunnels.



Story Book Cute

Wild badgers are not what you'd call cuddly, yet they are featured characters in many illustrated stories. Their comical short, wide bodies, cute round ears and colorful faces make them especially fun to draw. White-tipped guard hairs cover fuzzy underfur, giving badgers a grizzled look. The white stripe running from their black nose over the top of their head and the vivid white, dark brown and black markings on their faces look appealing.

Effective Defense Tactics

Like skunks, weasels and other members of their family, badgers have stinky scent glands at the base of their tail. Phew! Badgers bravely snarl, growl, hiss and lunge at attackers. Mom badgers defending their babies have chased people up trees, made bears go away and warned off coyotes.

It is hard for any animal to get a bite hold on a badger. Badgers have burly, muscular necks and shoulders. If another animal does manage to grab it, all is not lost. Thick, loose neck skin allows a badger to wriggle around to face its attacker. Strong jaws and sharp teeth coupled with a brave and bold nature usually allow adult badgers to avoid becoming prey.

Mighty Diggers Still in Danger

Badgers' stocky, flat bodies are designed for underground survival and super fast digging. They have see-through, second eyelids they can close to keep dirt out of their eyes and still see in front. They can dig themselves out of view in three minutes or less. They dig faster than two people with shovels. It is said they can dig through pavement and concrete. They dig for protection from weather and predators and to find prey.

Above ground, they risk getting run over by cars, poisoned, trapped or shot. When farming and human building activities expand into their habitat, badgers and their prey are often pushed out.



Badger Matching Game

Match the words in the first column with their definition in the second column.

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|----------------|---|
| 1) Burrow | A) Patches of colored hair, scales or skin on an animal |
| 2) Guard hairs | B) Space where animals find food, shelter and water |
| 3) Underfur | C) An animal that hunts other animals to eat |
| 4) Prey | D) Long outer hairs designed to protect animals from wind, rain and snow |
| 5) Predator | E) Front paws on an animal, the opposite of hind paws |
| 6) Habitat | F) Fuzzy hairs that provide insulating warmth beneath the outer guard hairs |
| 7) Markings | G) An animal that is hunted by another animal for food |
| 8) Fore paws | H) A tunnel or hole in the ground where an animal finds shelter |



Search for Signs of Badgers

Hunt for their two-inch paw tracks. They walk pigeon-toed so the front paw prints curve in toward each other. Marks from their super-long claws often show on the front paw tracks.

Search for badger holes near prairie dog towns or other open spaces on the grassy plains. A few badgers also make their homes in the foothills and mountain parks. A very few can even be found in high alpine meadows. Badgers seek out areas with sandy or soft soil for digging and where prey animals can be found easily.

Look for a hole that is twice as wide as it is high because the badger entrance is, well, badger-shaped. The opening is about 10 inches wide and only about 5 inches tall.



In areas close to human populations, badgers are most active at night, but they might be seen any time of day. The best chance to spot one is at dawn or dusk.

Answers: 1H, 2D, 3F, 4G, 5C, 6B, 7A, 8E