



The American Badger



Badgers in the desert? How strange! Well, at least that's what most people think when they first learn that badgers live right here at White Sands National Monument. Although most people associate them with forests, badgers make their homes in the desert as well

The American badger (*Taxidea taxus*) is found throughout western and central U.S., and in the southwest. They are primarily associated with grasslands and desert scrublands. In Mexico, where this species is also found, it is called tlalcoyote or tejón. The badger eats a variety of burrowing animals, but here at White Sands, it has a more restricted diet that consists mainly of southern plains woodrats, kangaroo rats, and other small rodents, lizards, carrion, as well as young burrowing owls.

Badgers are mostly nocturnal, but in remote places, like White Sands NM, they can occasionally be observed during the day. This is especially true of females with young, who tend to forage during the day and spend the nights with the young. Badgers seldom venture above ground unless the temperatures are above freezing. Badgers in this area do not hibernate, but go into a state of torpor (a state of lowered physiological activity typically characterized by reduced

metabolism, heart rate, respiration, and body temperature).

Because the soil in the monument is very compact and hard due to the high level of gypsum, badgers with their strong muscular legs and long front claws are able to dig burrows, both in search of prey and deeper burrows that are used as their dens. Badger burrows that are abandoned may then be occupied by kit foxes, skunks, desert cottontails, and black-tailed jackrabbits. Abandoned badger burrows also provide ready-made homes for burrowing owls. Badgers are not common at the monument, and thus the ones that are here are even more important because they provide homes for all of these other desert animals.

Badgers are also solitary, and are only found together during the breeding season (late summer–early fall) and mothers with their pups. Female badgers have two or three pups per litter. Female badgers are unique in that they experience delayed implantation. They delay their pregnancy until the months of



American badger eating a snake

December through February. This is done so that the young are born during a more favorable time of year between March and April. The families usually break-up between June and August with the juveniles dispersing to new, unoccupied areas. Female badgers do share their mother's territory.

Badgers are aggressive animals, and have few natural enemies. Dispersing juveniles in this area are probably only attacked and eaten by bobcats (which live at the outer edges of the monument). The most important threats to their survival include loss of habitat, and shooting and trapping. Badgers typically live nine to ten years in the wild, and may need as much as 2,000 acres of suitable habitat to have enough food and other resources to live and raise a family.

—Dr. M. Hildegard Reiser, Ph.D.,
Science Advisor, Chihuahuan Desert
Network



American Badger's den