

MDC seeks confirmed sightings of badgers, weasel, and spotted skunks

The badger, a master dirt mover, is one of Missouri's largest mammals and a fierce opponent with lengthy front claws if cornered. Yet thanks to low population numbers and their nocturnal, rather reclusive ways, many outdoor enthusiasts have never seen one. Biologists for the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) want to know more about them, and the public can help.

Laura Conlee, MDC furbearer biologist, is seeking photographs or carcasses of badgers. They help her add to a database that indicates how frequently badgers are observed and where they are distributed in Missouri. Conlee also seeks photos or carcasses for least weasels, long-tailed weasels, and spotted skunks. All four species have small or declining populations in the state and are listed as species of conservation concern.

Trail cameras sometimes capture photos or video of these mammals. Citizens sometimes photograph them, too. Furbearers are accidentally killed by vehicles along roadways and can be reported to MDC staff.

Trappers help with badger reports. Badgers can be legally harvested in Missouri during the established furbearer season and fur sales are reported to MDC. Although, badgers are not a sought after species and few are taken.

There is no hunting or trapping season for weasels or spotted skunks. Any of those species accidentally trapped live must be released. Those found dead must be turned over to a local conservation agent. Carcasses enable positive species identification and the collection of skulls and DNA for scientific study.

Badgers are squat, powerful, animals two to three-feet long and weighing up to 30 pounds. They have long claws on strong front legs used for tunneling burrows or for digging up prey such as mice or ground squirrels. Badgers feed primarily on rodents and rabbits. They need habitat where their food prey is present and where they can easily dig in soil for burrows and to catch prey. The prairie, woodland, and river breaks habitats in the western, northwest, and northeastern regions of the state are where they were historically most common, and where they are usually spotted today. Badgers can run 15 mph, swim capably, or dig a burrow and disappear underground in less than a minute.

But for most people, a badger is a rare sighting. Only 24 badger sightings were recorded by MDC in 2017 and 2018. Those were based on sightings, trapper and hunter reports, or badgers found dead on roadways. The loss of prairie and woodland habitat with suitable prey is one reason for their population decline, Conlee said. Their life habits also make them hard to see.

"They're nocturnal, and they live underground, you typically don't see them crossing over the road in front of you," Conlee said. "They're pretty elusive to begin with, and since they are less common than many other furbearers, people don't typically see them."

Spotted skunks are today seen primarily in the southeast Missouri Ozarks. The state is on the southern fringe of the least weasel's range, and they are only seen in north Missouri. Long-tailed weasels may be seen statewide, but they are rare in Missouri. Weasels are small but fierce predators, preferring to eat rodents.

Anyone with photos, video, or carcasses of badgers, spotted skunks, or weasels are asked to contact Conlee via email at laura.conlee@mdc.mo.gov.

For more information about rare mammals in Missouri, visit <http://mdc.mo.gov>.