

Conservation Corner

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Last week we looked at the Bobolink, a frequent and vocal companion on my weekly IBSN butterfly surveys at the Varina Wetlands. On my July 15th walk, I counted a record number of butterflies, 7 species and 131 individuals, but it is an experience at the start of the day's walk that will be this week's unexpected tidbit of summer.

Walking east along the old farm driveway, I was nearing the cedar windbreak that marks the site of the original Westmoreland farmstead when who should I meet but three American Badgers! Startled, I came to a stop and then warily watched as they ambled straight towards me. It's been many years, probably decades, since I've seen a badger in the wild, and I didn't quite know how to react. Of course, all I was carrying was my phone, a can of bug spray, and my survey sheet & pencil. Finally, at distances of 20, 15, and 10 feet, one by one they peeled off the driveway, scurried down the ditch, and disappeared into the restored prairie. Whew!

The American Badger, *Taxidea taxus*, is a carnivorous mammal found across central and western North America in habitat ranging from plains, prairies, deserts, woodland edges, and alpine meadows. While common in some areas, badgers are classified as endangered in British Columbia and Ontario and are protected in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Today, here in Iowa, badgers are uncommon. The 2014 Bowhunter Observation Survey counted only 0.4 badgers in northwest Iowa.

Badgers are easily recognized with their stocky, short-legged bodies covered with a grizzled coat of brown, black, and white hair, huge front claws, and triangle shaped face with black "badges" on their cheeks and white stripe down the center of their face. As the largest member of the weasel family, badgers range from 24-30 inches long and weigh up to 20 pounds.

Badgers are proficient diggers, constructing burrows for sleeping, hunting, storing food, and giving birth. In March or April, females give birth to 2-5 blind and helpless babies. The young are weaned at 8 weeks, and families break up in July and August as the juveniles strike out on their own. The mainstay of badger diets are small burrowing mammals but also include insects, birds, snakes, carrion, plant foods, mushrooms, and sunflower seeds, last year's food plot crop.

Badgers are aggressive animals with few natural enemies. The Native American badger totem represents courage, aggression, and healer. You're probably familiar with the expression "to badger someone" from the European custom of badger-baiting.

Badgers are mainly nocturnal, but in remote areas they routinely forage during the day. Looking back, I easily could have been the first human contact for these three young badgers. Have you seen a badger lately?

In closing, just a reminder that it's not too late to sign up for our Jr. Naturalist Day Camp coming up Aug. 2-4. This year's theme is Nature's Building Blocks. Call, email, or stop in the office today!

