



Media Release **Badger of Honour**

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For immediate release

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The American Badger, an endangered species protected under Ontario's Endangered Species Act (ESA), is a potential success story of a species at risk co-existing with agriculture.

"We never see them. They don't cause us any trouble, and having them around hasn't meant any changes to operations around here," say Mike and Bernie Bilinsky about the badger. The Bilinskys own a 25 acre parcel of land near Waterford in Norfolk County. Fifteen acres yield wheat straw for use on ginseng crops.

Two other local farmers, Thomas Porr, a former tobacco grower who now raises landscaping stock, and Eugene Magalas, cash cropper and poultry producer, have had similar experiences with badgers.

The Bilinskys first learned they had badgers on their land this past spring when they met Josh Sayers using radio-tracking equipment near their property. Sayers has worked as part of a Trent University initiative researching the status of badgers in Ontario since 2009.

American Badgers are slightly larger than a raccoon. Their wide, flattened body is built for digging with short, powerful legs and large front claws. With distinctive black and white stripes on their heads, badgers measure up to 0.76 meters in length. A female badger averages 7 kilograms, and males can weigh up to 11 kilograms.

"Badgers have never been common in this part of Ontario," says Sayers. "They are a top predator in the native tallgrass prairie ecosystem and help keep rodent populations in check. Badgers are solitary, nocturnal and have very large territories—5,000 to 10,000 acres—making them largely invisible to farmers and the general public alike."

A Recovery Team for the American Badger was established in 2003. "Very little was known about the badger in Ontario at the time," says Sayers, "so monitoring the population has been a big part of early efforts. We've had to work hard at getting reports of badger sightings and finding their burrows."

Tallgrass prairie in southern Ontario exists only in scattered remnants now, and restoration to the expanse that originally supported badgers is unlikely. The Ontario Badger Project, however, is finding badgers in common non-native vegetation of uncultivated corners of farmland, meaning that agriculture plays a major role in providing and maintaining their habitat.

Bilinsky discovered that firsthand. "I cleaned up a corner of our farm that was littered with debris," says Bilinsky. "It was a sandy ridge between two fields, now covered with grape vines and grasses. There are four badger dens in that corner. We've seen tracks, and hair snags installed just inside the den mouth also tell us when badgers have been there."

Badgers are highly mobile and use many burrows in the course of their wanderings, adding to the difficulty of establishing precise numbers. Monitoring efforts focused on 100 sites in Norfolk County, estimate burrow numbers at 400. Burrows can extend 3-meters underground and contain up to 10-meters of tunnels.

Badgers prefer friable soil, both for digging their own burrows, and because such soils support smaller burrowing mammals, their main prey. Burrows are often dug in pursuit of prey and can vary greatly in their characteristics. Badger dens for raising young are more complex than those used for resting and usually have a larger soil mound at the entrance.

A non-scientific estimate of the current southern Ontario badger population is about 200. More research is needed to determine the optimum size for a self-sustaining badger population.

Ontario's Endangered Species Act provides for regulations to protect habitat. The first Habitat Regulation under the ESA covers a number of endangered species, including the American Badger. The regulated habitat for badgers protects dens that are being used or have been used in the past 12 months, as well as a 5-meter radius around the entrance to the den.

“Having a regulation in place offers a means for dealing with instances of deliberate habitat destruction,” says Ron Gould, Species at Risk Biologist for the OMNR in Aylmer and Chair of the Recovery Team. “It also helps landowners understand the features and areas considered essential for badger survival. Given the rarity and temporary nature of badger dens, and that badgers typically avoid creating dens in cultivated fields, the likelihood of an impact on farming activities is low.”

Burrows of prey species, specifically groundhog, within 850 meters of an active badger den are also protected. While groundhogs have traditionally been considered a nuisance, times are changing as our awareness of the interconnectedness of all life increases.

The Habitat Regulation is intended to protect badgers, not to impose difficulties for farmers. Should it become an issue, farmers are encouraged to seek advice for options to deal with groundhogs or other prey that may be interfering with farming operations. The continued survival of badgers depends on farmers. Two-way communication between farmers and wildlife agencies is essential to protect badgers and ensure the needs of farming operations.

The main threat to badgers is habitat loss. With the majority of badger dens located on private land, voluntary stewardship efforts by farmers are important. Farmers interested in enhancing badger habitat on their properties may have the opportunity to access cost-share funding through the Species at Risk Farm Incentive Program (SARFIP), which reimburses farmers for up to 50% of eligible costs for qualified best management practices.

SARFIP is linked to the Canada-Ontario Environmental Farm Plan and funded by the OMNR and the Government of Canada. The Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association delivers the program locally. Eligibility for funding requires a Farm Business Registration Number and a deemed-appropriate Third Edition EFP.

The recovery effort for badgers depends on sightings of both badgers and burrows, which you can report to the Ontario Badger Project at their toll-free hotline 1-877-715-9299 or your local OMNR office. The Ontario Badger Project website www.ontariobadgers.com offers further information on badgers and agriculture.