

Anyone who's eaten a box of chocolates in the last, oh, 15 or so years—ever since the movie *Forrest Gump* came out—knows that life is like that box of assorted deliciousness. You never know what you're going to get.

It's the same with roadkill.

Head down any local byway and you'll likely see brown lumps of varying sizes and shapes. Some are bigger, some are smaller but, gosh, what the heck are they?

Just for kicks, let's take this candy-n-roadkill metaphor just one step further. If you've had much experience with boxes of chocolates, you know that it is possible to know what you're going to get. The rectangular shapes tend to be caramels; the lumpy ones have nuts in them. The round, dome-shaped ones tend to have some sort of crème filling (except for the occasional maraschino cherry). And only occasionally do you come upon a surprise, like a chocolate-covered graham cracker or one of those weird jelly things.

It's the same with roadkill.

The large grayish brown lumps with striped tails are raccoons. The smaller, reddish or grayish lumps are squirrels. Whitish-gray lumps are opossums; black and white (and stinky) lumps are skunks. And the giant lumps, sometimes with car parts lying nearby, are the unmistakable remains of whitetail deer.

Yep, with few exceptions, roadkill in Kane County is pretty predictable. But every once in a while, you come upon a very pleasant surprise. Like we did last week.

Our coworker Denis Kania, natural areas manager at the park district, was driving west on Red Gate Road, just east of Randall, when he saw a familiar-sized lump in the road. The brownish fur, he figured, was most likely that of a raccoon. But as he proceeded past, his sharp eyes caught a glimpse of something very un-raccoonlike: a white stripe down

the middle of the face. In Illinois, that marking can mean only one thing: Badger!



A couple of quick three-point turns, and Denis's identification was confirmed. A young male badger had met his maker, probably sometime during the overnight hours.

Unless you're a Wisconsin fan, or a naturalist, news of a badger getting smacked in St. Charles probably doesn't mean much. But the fact is, this burrowing mammal has

become an increasingly rare sight in our area. The taxidermied badger we have at Pottawatomie, found dead more than a decade ago at what was then Campton Hills Park, was thought to be among the last of the badgers in eastern Kane County.

And that's a shame, because the badger is one extraordinary mammal. Sure they're ornery ("solitary and defensive" in naturalist-speak) and well-armed, with 34 sharp teeth and front claws that measure almost 2 inches in length. But they consume tremendous amounts of rodents, insects and carrion—the types of things that would get out of hand without some means of control. And the burrows they excavate—sometimes at a rate of one a day, in search of prey—become homes for many types of wildlife less well equipped for digging.

Habitat loss is probably the main reason we don't see many badgers in our area anymore. These hefty critters need a fairly large territory for their size, as much as 3 or 4 square miles. And unlike raccoons and skunks, which are perfectly at home around your home, badgers prefer open space—something we don't have a lot of anymore.

Curiously, research has shown that badgers in other areas have formed cooperative associations with another animal that's become extremely common here—the coyote. Both species prey on rodents, but use different methods. Badgers can dig them up, but can't chase them down. Coyotes can chase, but aren't as effective at digging. When a badger is trying to dig out a ground squirrel and it flees thru an exit hole, Coyote gets a meal. But when Coyote is chasing a ground squirrel and it dives down a hole, Badger snags a snack.

I'm not saying that more coyotes automatically equates to more badgers, but we definitely have an abundance of coyotes. And now a badger—granted, a dead badger, but a badger nonetheless, appears. Interesting, huh?

The next time you're out for a drive and come upon a lump in the road, take a closer look. You never know what you're going to get. And, who knows? You just may get to see a badger.

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