

Highway medians are a food source for wildlife, study shows

June 27 2019, by Katie Willis



A red squirrel is caught on camera on a wildlife passage at a four-lane highway in Quebec. Squirrels and other small mammals use the passages to get to vegetation growing in the highway medians. Credit: April Martinig

Small animals such as weasels, mink and chipmunks are using highway medians as food sources, according to new research by University of Alberta biologists.

"We observed [animals](#) foraging for everything from other mammals,

such as [red squirrels](#) looking for birds, to vegetation, like chipmunks with full cheek pouches," said April Martinig, a Ph.D. student in [biological sciences](#) and lead author on the study.

The researchers collected data over three years using infrared cameras installed at six locations along a four-lane highway in Quebec with vegetation growing in the medians.

The results showed many [small mammals](#) were getting to the medians through wildlife passages, which are designed to help animals circumvent human-made barriers such as roadways.

"I did not expect to see such a wide variety of foraging behaviour," said Martinig, who is conducting her Ph.D. studies under the supervision of ecologist Stan Boutin. "I also did not expect to see animals using the wildlife passages specifically to forage, since the prevailing assumption is that animals use wildlife passages to cross highways, not spend time in the habitat between highway lanes."

She added that weasels were the most likely species to forage in the vegetated median, followed by red squirrels, chipmunks, mice, voles, shrews, moles and mink.

Food for thought

Martinig said that in addition to showing how flexible and adaptable animals can be, her research has practical implications.

"Maintaining habitat between highway lanes such as with a vegetated median and not providing safe access to it with something like wildlife passages might attract animals to roads, where they are at an increased risk of collisions with vehicles."

The study, "Vegetated Highway Medians as Foraging Habitat for Small Mammals," was published in the *Wildlife Society Bulletin*.

More information: April Robin Martinig et al. Vegetated highway medians as foraging habitat for small mammals, *Wildlife Society Bulletin* (2019). [DOI: 10.1002/wsb.967](https://doi.org/10.1002/wsb.967)

Provided by University of Alberta

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